

BOYS
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Y.M.C.A.



The
Y.M.C.A BOYS
of CLIFFWOOD
BROOKS HENDERLEY

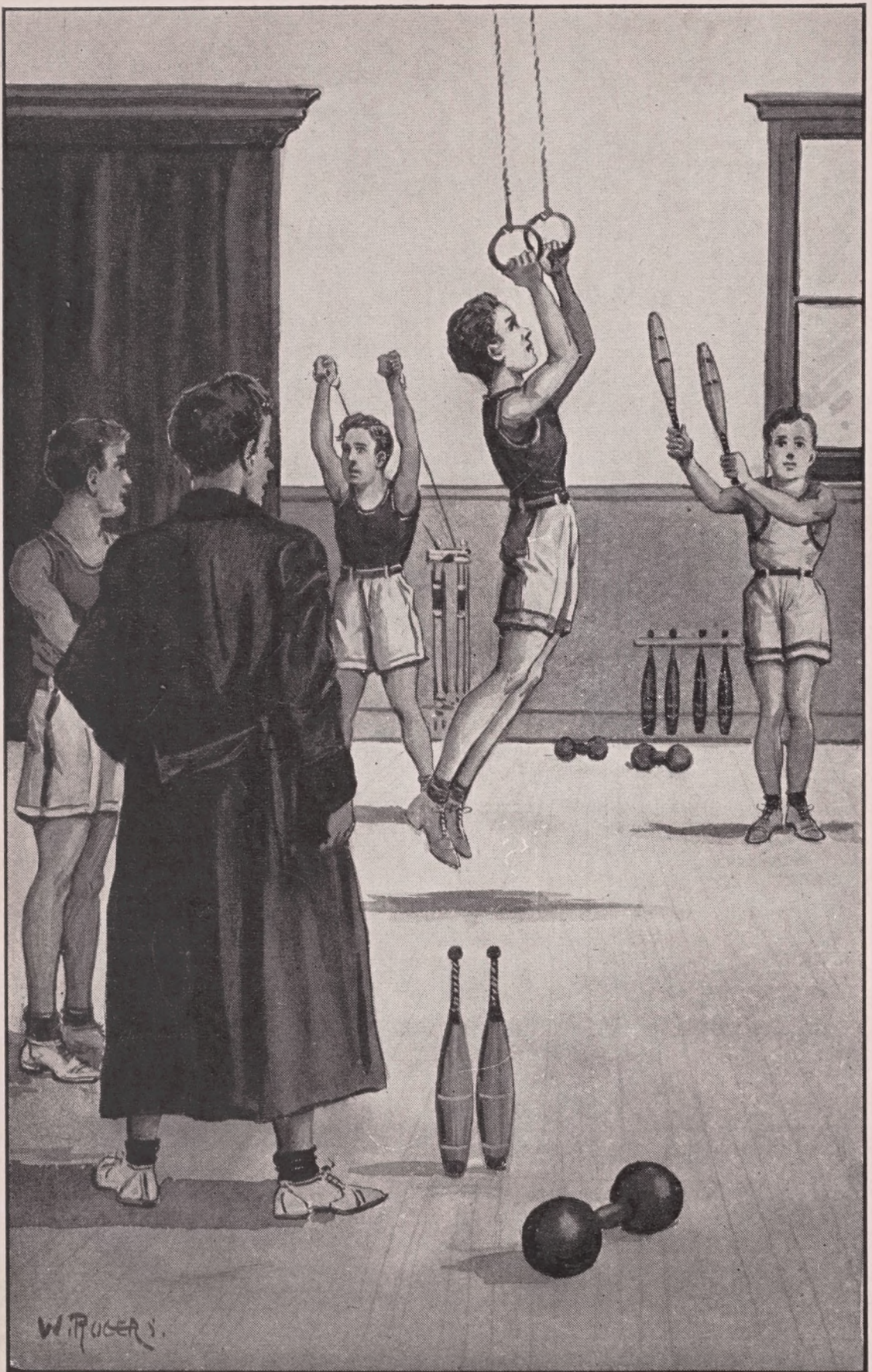


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ONE EVENING IN THE WEEK THE JUNIORS WERE ALLOWED
THE FREEDOM OF THE GYMNASIUM.

The Y. M. C. A. Boys of Cliffwood

Page 124

The
Y. M. C. A. Boys
of Cliffwood

Or
The Struggle for the Holwell Prize

BY
BROOKS HENDERLEY

Author of "The Y. M. C. A.
Boys on Bass Island" Etc.

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK
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BOOKS FOR BOYS

BY

BROOKS HENDERLEY

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Price per volume, 60 cents, postpaid.

✓ **THE Y. M. C. A. BOYS SERIES** ✓

THE Y. M. C. A. BOYS OF CLIFFWOOD;
or The Struggle for the Holwell Prize

THE Y. M. C. A. BOYS ON BASS ISLAND;
or The Mystery of Russabaga Camp

(Other volumes in preparation)

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The Y. M. C. A. Boys of Cliffwood

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THE Y. M. C. A. BOYS OF CLIFFWOOD

CHAPTER I

OUT WITH THE BOYS ON HALLOWE'EN

"How's that, fellows?"

"Everything's lovely, and the *gate* hangs high, not the goose!"

"Mr. Philpot is going to have some climb, believe me, before he gets it down out of that big oak, as sure as my name's Dan Fenwick!"

"And say, wouldn't you like to see Farmer Hasty in the morning when he rubs his eyes and stares up at his wagon, all taken apart, and strung along the ridge pole of his barn roof?"

"That was a cracking good idea of yours, Dick, and no mistake!"

"Hurrah for Hallowe'en, and all its fun!"

"What's next on the programme, boys? We're out for a good time tonight, you know."

"It isn't much after eleven at that. Who's got another clever joke laid out?"

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"I have; and when you hear what the game is you'll all say it's the boss scheme of the lot, barring none."

"Listen to Nat, will you? I wondered why he was lugging that bundle around with him all the evening. I guess it's got something to do with his grand Hallowe'en prank."

"It has, and a whole lot, Peg Fosdick," proudly admitted the boy upon whom all eyes were eagerly centered just then.

"Who's the victim, Nat?" demanded one fellow, the same who had owned to the name of Dan Fenwick.

"Who but that crusty old storekeeper, Jed Nocker," said the big, overgrown boy with a chuckle of delight. "Everybody else seems to have just gone and clean forgotten all about *him* to-night."

At mention of this name all sorts of groans and catcalls arose from the group of seven lads standing on a corner in a quiet, residential part of the usually bustling mill town of Cliffwood.

"The meanest old codger in our town!" exclaimed one fellow, in sheer disgust.

"And he hates all boys worse than he does snakes!"

"Cuffed my ears more'n once, let me tell you, for some little thing I did in meeting."

"Oh! my mother says Deacon Nocker believes

every boy is as chock full of original sin as an egg is of meat; and that the only way to get it out is to keep on whaling the boy."

"His pet saying is 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' I've heard people say."

"Huh! all the same that kind of tactics didn't keep the Deacon's only boy from being wild," chuckled Dan Fenwick, wickedly, as though it gave him considerable pleasure to remember that in this particular case guidance didn't begin at home.

"Oh! they say Amos always was a bad egg, and that the old deacon wrestled with him day after day. Then something came up, and Amos ran away. The deacon scratched his name off his books, and refused to send along a dollar, even when he heard Amos was married, and had a little boy of his own."

"Well, it was an oversight for us to let Jed Nocker off this Hallowe'en, when we always had him on our list," admitted the boy the others had called Dick, and who, despite the fact that his clothes looked well worn, seemed to be something of a leader among his mates.

"Then you agree to listen to my big scheme for giving him the scare of his life, do you, Dick Horner?" demanded Nat, eagerly.

He very well knew that once Dick had stamped the idea O. K. the others would hasten to follow suit, because they had great faith in Dick's abil-

ity as a pilot, whether in baseball, on the gridiron, or in such rough-and-tumble sports as all town boys pursue so strenuously.

"I want to hear it first," replied Dick, cautiously, showing that he had a streak of discretion in his nature for all he was such a madcap. "Suppose we adjourn to the sand lot up the street. It's more retired than this corner, and we can talk it over without any one running across us."

"A bright idea, Dick!" exclaimed another boy who had not as yet broken into the conversation. Leslie Capes was known as a fellow of few words, preferring to listen until he had mastered all the points of a discussion before giving his particular views.

"Come along then, fellows," urged the big, broad-shouldered Nat, eagerly, leading the way along the street; "and ten to one you'll say my scheme is just the boss way to pay old Nocker back for all he's done to the boys of Cliffwood."

While they are hurrying along toward the open sand lot spoken of, a few explanations regarding the fun-loving lads may not come in amiss, since these boys and others of the rising generation of Cliffwood are destined to figure largely in our story.

Dick Horner was a clever young chap, though inclined to be headstrong and wild. He lived in an humble cottage home with his little sister Sue,

his mother, a widow, and old "Grandpop" Horner, a Civil War veteran, who had long been a striking figure in Cliffwood. The old soldier with his white locks down almost to his shoulders lived pretty much in the days of the dead and gone past, and could rarely talk without bringing up the times when he had fought so well.

Pretty much all the Horners had to live upon consisted of the pension a generous government paid the veteran yearly in installments, and a small yearly sum from a meager investment in some industrial stocks, so that Dick seldom saw anything like new clothes unless he earned the money himself.

Dan Fenwick and Leslie Capes were Dick's two most intimate chums. The former was as full of the spirit of mischief as Dick himself, but when it came down to a question of leadership, both of them readily yielded the palm to Dick, whose will seemed to bend theirs.

Leslie's folks were comfortably well off. In addition to this there was an old indulgent uncle living with them, who could be prevailed upon to keep Leslie well supplied with funds, though the money always came accompanied with good advice. Uncle Henry believed in boys.

Peg Fosdick had once broken his leg, and ever since had walked with a slight limp. At home and in school he was called Oscar, but the tempta-

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tion to dub him "Peg" had proved so strong that long ago he had yielded to the inclination of his companions and readily answered to that nickname.

The other boys were Andy Hale and Elmer Jones, both of them just ordinary chaps without any remarkable traits of character. Both were good-natured fellows, ready for fun, or even a little row for a change, the type of boy you can always run across by the dozen in any American town.

Cliffwood was something of a manufacturing town, by virtue of the output of several mills that depended on the water power yielded by the little Sweetwater River. Half a mile above the town lay the rapids, with a fall of some fifteen feet or more. This natural advantage in power had caused the erection of the big Bartlett Paper Mills, and several other manufacturing establishments.

Cliffwood, on this account, had more than its share of workers, who, as a rule, received fair wages, and were seemingly contented.

Dick Horner looked forward to the time when he would be big enough to start to work and earn enough money to supply his dear mother with more of the comforts of life. He hated to be so poor, and this desire to do something for his mother was really one of the best things in the boy's nature.

Dick did not have so bad a reputation in the

town as the big bully, Nat Silmore, but all the same the stories that drifted to the ears of his anxious mother often caused her gentle heart pain. Dick, upon being appealed to, always promised to turn over a new leaf, and then in the end his natural overflow of wild spirits led him into some new mischief, for which in turn he would be sorry.

The vacant lot which Dick had in view was not far distant, so the seven boys out for Hallowe'en sport soon arrived there. Eager to hear what Nat had to say, the others clustered around the big fellow. As a rule the others rather preferred Nat's room to his company.

"Here we are waiting for you to give us the particulars of your grand stunt, Nat," remarked Dan, impatiently tugging at the other's sleeve.

"Yes," added Peg, "and the sooner you open up the quicker we can get busy; that is, of course, if we think it's a good idea."

"Oh! I ain't worrying myself about you backing out," said Nat, with fine scorn. "I've done some big things in my time, and if I do say it myself this takes the cake for boldness. We'll pay the crusty old skinflint back for all the snappy things he's done to the boys of Cliffwood."

"Get busy, Nat," said Dick, shortly.

Somehow these few words seemed to have more effect on Nat than all the urging of the other fellows. He knew Dick could veto the scheme if he

felt inclined, and since his own cronies were debarred from keeping him company on this one wild night of the year, by reason of sickness, and absence from town, Nat had to depend on Dick's crowd for assistance in carrying out his plan.

"All right, Dick, here goes then," he hastened to say, as he started to unwrap the bundle he had been carrying around with him. "You can see just what I've toted along so as to be ready for business when the right time came."

"Why, it looks like a small drygoods store, I declare!" exclaimed Peg.

"Old sheets, fellows," announced Nat, triumphantly. "D'ye know what they can be used for? Any of you ever play *ghost* in your lives? Well, I have, and a sheet is always needed in the game."

"Go on and tell us what you aim to do with the old sheets, Nat!" urged Andy.

"Just this," then replied the other eagerly. "We can creep through the grounds of the empty Brandon place that lies next door to Jed's property. We'll find some way to get inside his house, and just when the town clock is striking midnight, we'll start to groaning to beat the band, and show up before the old chap. Dick here, who can throw his voice so well, will do the talking, and tell him we've come from the land of spirits to take him back with us. There, what d'ye think of my scheme, fellows? Ain't it a dandy?"

CHAPTER II

A SCHEME THAT WENT WRONG

FOR a brief interval after Nat had so triumphantly announced his grand scheme for frightening Old Deacon Nocker the other boys were still. Apparently, every one was digesting the idea, and coming to some sort of a mental decision. Dan Fenwick was the first to voice his views.

"It strikes me as a cracking good prank, Nat!" he exclaimed, "and I'm voting to help you carry the same out."

"Count me in for one of your old sheets, Nat!" cried Peg, enthusiastically.

"Dick, what do you say?" asked Leslie Capes, a little anxiously, as though he rather hoped the other would veto the whole business by declaring it was too silly, or too full of danger.

If this was Leslie's expectation, he was doomed to disappointment, for Dick immediately came out with a full endorsement of Nat's proposal.

"I go you, Nat," he said, presently; "the scheme is worth trying out. Of course, if any fellow chooses to stand back and miss the fun, he's at lib-

erty to do it; but I'll borrow one of your old sheets; and I'll do my level best to throw my voice so as to make it sound like it came up from the grave."

"Then we're all in on the game, if you say so, Dick," declared Andy Hale.

"Ditto here!" echoed Elmer, feeling that the die was now cast; and no one had ever called him a quitter.

"How about you, Leslie?" asked Nat, sneeringly, for he had noticed that the other seemed uneasy when the great scheme was first broached.

"Who, me?" replied the Capes boy, scornfully. "Did any one ever know me to back down when my chums were in for a lark? I speak for another of the sheets, Nat."

"There, the clock struck the half hour," interrupted Dick, "and if we want to be on deck at exactly midnight, we'd better get a hustle on."

"Come along fellows, we'll chase out along the road here to the Brandon place, and climb the fence there. Say, I prowled around today and got my bearings all right."

It was not a great distance to the vacant Brandon place, and the seven mischief-loving boys scrambled over the old fence with the greatest of ease. Nat did not seem really to need any lantern to show him the way, so well had he stamped the lay of the grounds on his memory.

Arriving at the dividing fence he showed the others where he had taken pains to pull off some boards, allowing a free passage to the adjoining grounds of the rich old storekeeper, who seemed to have such a poor opinion of all boys after his complete failure to bring his own son up by strict methods.

"Look there, I can see lights in his house!" whispered Elmer.

"Oh! that's nothing unusual!" declared Dick; "they say the old man is awake all hours of the night, making up his accounts and reading. He puts on a bold front, but I reckon when he heard that his boy died away out West it hit him harder than he'll ever own up."

"Still he's as hard as nails," grunted Dan. "My folks say he had a letter from the girl his son Amos married, telling him that she and her little boy were awful poor; and the old skinflint had the nerve to get Lawyer Bodgkin here to write that if she sent the kid on he'd agree to stand for his education, but that he'd never set eyes on the woman who'd married Amos, thinking she'd fall into all the old man's money."

"But she never did send the child, you notice," said Leslie. "Which proves that she cared more for him than Old Jed's miser gold."

"Stop jabbering there, you fellers," muttered Nat, with a touch of his ordinary bullying author-

ity, for he was used to lording it over Dit Hennesy and several other boys.

"Yes," Dick went on to say, "let's creep up close to the house, and find out if we can get in through some window he's forgotten to fasten. Quiet now, everybody."

They wriggled their way through the new leafless undergrowth with considerable skill, and soon reached the side of the large building. Then a hasty search was made, which resulted in the discovery that one window fastening had been overlooked by Old Jed when going his rounds earlier in the evening.

Dick soon had the window raised without making any noise. Perhaps the hearts of several of those boys beat faster than customary as they crawled in through the aperture. They knew they were doing something that bordered on the lawless, for to break in and enter a house, even in pursuit of Hallowe'en fun, was an act that no court would sanction or forgive, no matter how lenient the judge might be.

What made it seem more realistic was the fact that Nat had come prepared to show them the way, for he carried a small electric flashlight, which, by constantly keeping in action, he could use to advantage.

"Whee! this makes me feel queer," whispered Andy in the ear of Elmer, as they started to pick

their way across the room, avoiding such obstacles as chairs and tables.

"Wonder if this is the way a burglar always feels," the other answered, in such a low tone that it could not have been heard three feet away.

Dick turned on them, and shook his head as if to intimate that even such communications were out of order. Then he started to get his sheet fixed, Nat having previously torn places in each covering so that they could be used for peep holes.

By the time four of them had rigged themselves out in these ridiculous costumes, the parlor of Deacon Nocker's big house looked as though it might be the assembling place for the whole ghost tribe.

After glancing about to make sure all was ready, Nat gave Dick the signal agreed upon. From that time forward he wanted Dick to take the lead, since it was up to the other to do what speaking was required.

They could see that there was a light in the library, for a line under the connecting door betrayed this fact. The window being open, every one plainly heard the not far-distant town clock begin to strike the witching hour of midnight.

Hardly had the last solemn clang died away when a deep groan arose, Dick being the one to start the ball rolling. He waited to ascertain what the effect might be before repeating the performance.

Evidently, Deacon Nocker had heard the groan, for they caught the sound of his chair falling over in his haste to jump to his feet. The question now was whether he would be afraid to look in on them as they hoped. But all doubt on that score was quickly dissipated, for the old man suddenly threw the door wide open, and then started back at sight of what he saw beyond.

The four who were covered with the sheets all pointed straight at the owner of the house, just as they had read supposed-to-be ghosts always did. Elmer, Dan and Andy, not possessing any ghostly apparel, had hidden themselves behind sundry articles of bulky furniture, whence they peered out as best they might in the endeavor to see all the "fun."

At first sight it appeared as though Deacon Nocker was a badly frightened man, especially when a mysterious and solemn voice sounding very creepy, and coming from overhead, was heard.

"Be warned, rash mortal," it said. "We have come from the land of spirits to tell you to mend your ways before it is too late. Love your neighbors, and do good. If they smite you on one cheek turn the other. Help the poor and needy when the cold winds of winter begin to blow. Your time on earth is short, and you will have no other chance. Listen, ponder, and act!"

Considering that Dick had such a short time in

which to think up what he ought to say when pointing his hand at the old deacon this was not so bad. Some of his companions considered it highly entertaining; indeed, Elmer, or was it Andy, safe in his place of concealment, even ventured to chuckle. This sound may have given the alarmed old man the first suspicion that his ghostly visitors were something more than they seemed to be in that half-darkened room.

They heard him utter a snarl. Then he reached in with one hand, there was a sudden "click" and the parlor was flooded with light, for the deacon had turned the electric switch!

Of course in that dazzling glow the nature of the precious "fake" was readily exposed. The boys saw the deacon stare angrily at them, and then whirling around rush back into his library as though for something with which to assail these unbidden guests.

"Cut for it, fellows; he's gone for his gun!" exclaimed Nat, excitedly, at the same moment throwing his sheet aside and heading directly for the open window, through which he plunged headlong.

The others, seized with a panic after the collapse of Nat's grand scheme, also jumped for the only exit. Some went through about as speedily as Nat had done, while others attempted climbing down a little more carefully.

By great good luck every one managed to get outside the house before Old Jed appeared in the open window of the lighted parlor, carrying a rusty double-barrel shotgun in his hands. He was very angry it seemed, because of the fright to which he had been subjected, for without hesitation, he fired both barrels of his weapon, though aiming a bit high.

Seven panic-stricken boys plunged through a wilderness of bushes, colliding with sundry trees which they failed to notice, and reaching the fence by the road at various angles. Here there were exhibited all sorts of speedy "high and lofty vaulting," as the circus posters term it, some of the fellows even landing on all fours in the dust of the road.

A short time afterwards a number of them collected on the sand lot to compare experiences. Several were nursing bumps they had received from a too close and intimate acquaintance with the trees in Deacon Nocker's front yard. Dan was holding his handkerchief to his nose, and the sanguinary hue of the aforementioned article would indicate that he had come to grief in his mad flight.

Still they would not have been real boys if they had not seen the humorous side of their late adventure. Even Dan chuckled between dips with his handkerchief, though Dick made him throw

his head back, and breathe evenly so as to try to stop the flow of blood.

"Where's Nat?" demanded Leslie, half angrily.

"Oh! you won't see Nat around again," asserted Andy, confidently. "I know him too well to expect that. He's about home by this time, for his kind always runs away, to let others shoulder the blame."

"What's bothering me," admitted Elmer, ruefully, "is whether Old Jed recognized any of us. When he flashed that light he must have seen me staring out at him from behind that sofa."

"And I'm afraid I dropped my cap somewhere," said Dick, uneasily. "The worst thing about it is I was silly enough to write my name inside."

"Whew! that may mean a whole lot of trouble for the crowd, Dick!" exclaimed Leslie. "But just remember that what happens to one must concern all. We're every bit as guilty as you are; and if Old Jed starts to give you any trouble we'll all own up and take the penalty."

"That's mighty good of you to say that, Leslie," declared Dick. "But perhaps after all the deacon will remember it was Hallowe'en. He must have been a boy himself once, and ought to forgive such pranks. But let's get home now, fellows, and forget our troubles. Come on, Dan, if you're through shedding your gore. So-long all the rest of you."

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO HAD FAITH

"GOOD morning, Mr. Holwell!"

"Glad to see you, Harry. I suppose you are on your way to the mills, for since you decided to act as assistant to your good father, instead of going another two years to college, you've been sticking pretty close to your work."

Mr. Thomas Holwell, the best-loved pastor in Cliffwood, shook hands most heartily with the fine looking young fellow whom he had met on the main street of the town about eight o'clock in the morning of that first day of November.

Harry Bartlett was the only son of the head of the big paper mills. He had always been a credit to the town, and won many honors for his school both with regard to scholarships and in athletics. Two years in college had seen him getting along famously, when a change in his father's health caused him to alter all his plans, bringing him back home to assume some of the business cares.

"Oh! I find plenty of time to be doing some

THE MAN WHO HAD FAITH

other things that I care for, in spite of the heavy work at the mills," replied young Bartlett, cheerily.

"Yes, I know you are taking a deep interest in the work at our local Y. M. C. A.," the older gentleman went on to say, still gripping Harry's hand warmly in his. "It was largely through the benevolence of your good father that we were able to hire that building, and establish a home for our many young men, where they could be kept off the street nights, and enjoy themselves in clean sport."

The boys and young men in Cliffwood had no better friend in all that region than the Rev. Thomas Holwell. It had been largely through his hearty labors that the idea of having a local Y. M. C. A. finally assumed definite shape, and leading men of the town had subscribed enough money to put the project through.

"I fancy the younger element in town must have been pretty busy last night," Harry remarked, partly to change the subject, for he was very modest, and never liked to hear his own praises sung, even by the minister whom he loved so well.

"Oh! as to that," the older gentleman observed, "we always expect something along the line of innocent pranks to happen on that one boys' night of the year. Wise people take in their doormats and clothes-poles. Some I know even make it a

point to hide all gates that are removable, ash barrels, and such things. We mustn't forget that we were boys ourselves once upon a time."

Harry laughed as though some memories connected with sundry doings along those same lines haunted him.

"They seem to be getting bolder every year, I'm afraid," he continued. "I was out for a tramp as a sort of bracer, after daylight this morning, and wondered what on earth old Farmer Hasty could be doing up on the roof of his big barn. It seems some boys had taken one of his wagons all apart, and fastened the wheels along the ridge-pole. He was pretty mad about it too."

Mr. Holwell sighed and shook his head.

"Some of those boys are getting to be pretty wild, I'm afraid, Harry," he went on to remark, reflectively. "They pursue their desire for fun too far. I've been doing more or less hard thinking lately about them, and mean to have a serious talk with you soon, to see if something can be done to lead that love for a frolic in the right channel."

"Here comes Mr. Nocker, and looking more severe than I ever knew him to be," remarked Harry Bartlett. "I wonder if any of the boys have been playing practical jokes on the deacon. I can remember doing that same thing, and once got a good drenching in the bargain from a bucket of water at his hands."

"Good morning, Deacon Nocker," said Mr. Holwell, as the richest storekeeper in Cliffwood reached them. "Harry here was saying you looked worried this fine morning. I hope you have not had anything more happen to trouble you?"

The crabbed old man shook his head as he hastened to reply to this question.

"I'm on my way straight to the office of the Chief of Police, to swear out warrants against three boys of this town, who entered my house late last night, forcing a window just like ordinary burglars. It's high time the perverted natures of our boys were checked. I'll see to it these three are put under bonds to behave themselves. I've stood enough, and this outrage is the last straw that breaks the patient camel's back."

"Who are the three lads, Deacon Nocker?" asked Mr. Holwell, with deep anxiety in his voice, for he loved all boys, and believed in them.

"I found this cap on my floor after I'd frightened the lot off, and it's marked Dick Horner," the old man hastened to say, triumphantly flourishing the head gear as he spoke. "Then I recognized two other young scamps as Elmer Jones and Daniel Fenwick. I'm going to have the law on them for breaking in. The rest of the crowd had some silly sort of white gowns like sheets on, so I didn't see their faces. But the police will find out who they were, never fear."

"They must have been trying to play ghost, thinking to frighten you, Mr. Nocker!" exclaimed Harry, trying hard to repress the smile he felt creeping over his face, for possibly he may have been guilty of some such prank in his younger days.

"No matter what they meant to do," retorted the old man, angrily. "It was next door to a crime to break into a private house as they did. And trying to frighten any one through such outrageous means might end in serious results, in case the victim were afflicted with heart trouble, as I am. I shall see that Dick Horner and his companions are made to suffer for their escapade."

He was about to move on when Mr. Holwell caught his arm.

"Please wait a minute, Deacon Nocker," said the minister, seriously. "You might in your calmer moments regret having caused the Widow Horner additional sorrow. We all know she has seen enough, as it is. If you will listen to my advice it may not be necessary for you to proceed to such extreme measures as to cause the arrest of those good-hearted, but reckless, lads."

"Boys should be taken in hand and treated severely if you want them to amount to anything, Mr. Holwell," protested the storekeeper, who, nevertheless, entertained considerable respect for his pastor, and consequently did not break away from his gentle, detaining grasp.

"I know that has always been your policy, Deacon," said the other. "But some of us believe boys are more sinned against than sinning. I myself fancy there is some good in *every* boy, if only you can find it. The trouble is we go about it the wrong way. It is a case of the fierce wind failing to tear the traveler's cloak off, when the warm, genial sunshine soon caused him to shed it."

"But the Good Book tells us not to refrain from using the rod," urged the storekeeper. "I have heard you read that passage more than a few times, Mr. Holwell."

"Yes, but use it in moderation," explained the minister, "and then only in love. If I had a boy of my own I would never whip or punish him for heedless things he may have done without a heart-to-heart talk with him afterwards, and a reconciliation. Harsh actions do not profit one in the case of boys. I really believe it only serves to make them think they are being imposed upon, and their liberties destroyed, which leads to open rebellion."

"Well, since you ask it as a favor, Mr. Holwell," the deacon went on to say, reluctantly, "I will promise to forego my threat this time. But it is the last opportunity for those three young jackanapes. If they ever attempt to bait me again, I will surely bring them to book, no matter what ill feeling it causes."

"Thank you, Deacon," said the minister, shak-

ing the old man's hand, which was put in his rather reluctantly it must be confessed. "On my part, I promise you that something is soon going to be done to curb the reckless habit our boys have of seeking excitement, and what they call fun. I think we shall be able to make a considerable difference in their habits, once we get started."

At that prophecy the crabbed old man snorted.

"I imagine that will happen, Mr. Holwell," he said, sneeringly, "when the heavens fall, or water starts to run uphill. Kind words never yet controlled youthful spirits. It's strap-oil that is needed to make decent men of them."

"Ah! yes, but even that stern method often fails, Deacon," the minister gently reminded him, and the old man's face went whiter than usual, while speech failed him utterly; for like a stab there must have come to him the remembrance of the bright-faced young fellow he had sent away from home years ago, and whom he never saw again in life.

He broke away from the hand of the minister, and muttering to himself, stamped off; but both of them saw that at least he was now headed for his store, and not in the direction of police headquarters.

Mr. Holwell and Harry Bartlett stood there looking after him. The young fellow appeared somewhat amused, but his companion was very

grave, and the lines on his forehead told that serious thoughts were gripping him.

"Things are getting worse all the while, it seems, Harry," remarked the minister, finally. "Our boys are constantly becoming more reckless, it strikes me, in their desire to have what they call fun. The times are changing, and we must change with them. What answered in my younger days will not fill the bill in these times."

"I'm afraid you're about right there, sir," Harry admitted. "Even I can notice that boys are getting out of hand very fast. They hesitate at nothing when out for a good time. And I run across a great many boys loitering on the street corners as late as ten o'clock at night."

"Mostly because their homes have not been made attractive enough for them," the observant minister went on to say. "But I've tried in vain to get the co-operation of their parents. Something else must be done, some way found whereby we can obtain and hold the interest of these half-grown lads. And Harry, a brilliant idea flashed into my mind last night while I sat alone brooding in my study."

"I should like to hear what it is, then."

"First of all I want to tell you, Harry, that I shall surely need your hearty backing if the plan I have in view is going to meet with a shadow of success."

"Before I hear a word of your scheme, sir, I can promise you that much," said the younger member of the newly reorganized firm of Bartlett & Company, with hearty emphasis.

"I felt sure I could count on your whole-souled assistance, Harry!" Mr. Holwell exclaimed, joyously. "Like myself you believe in boys to the utmost."

"Then tell me what it is you have been considering, sir," urged Harry.

"A radical step in our service for young men and boys," said the minister, with flashing eyes, and enthusiasm beaming from every feature of his rosy, healthy face. "It is nothing more or less than to start a junior organization in the Y. M. C. A., giving younger lads a chance to form a club, granting them the privileges of the gymnasium, the reading rooms, and admission to the lecture course as well. What do you say to that, Harry?"

"A splendid scheme, Mr. Holwell, and I'll go into it with all my heart and soul."

"Come over to the parsonage tonight, then, Harry, and fetch your father along. I'll have a few other people, ladies as well, present, and we'll talk over the project; but I tell you now once for all we must push it through; no halfway measure will do. Call it eight this evening, Harry. And here's wishing great luck to the Boys' Department of the Y. M. C. A.!"

CHAPTER IV

SOME WONDERFUL NEWS

Two days after the Hallowe'en episode, Dick Horner, walking along the main street of Cliffwood, stopped to look in at the window of the sporting goods establishment. The display of guns, fishing tackle, football and hockey requirements, as well as many games for home and club entertainment, always possessed a peculiar fascination for Dick.

He sighed now as he surveyed these tempting things, for money being always a scarce commodity at the little Horner cottage, poor Dick could not afford to squander much on luxuries.

A hearty slap on the back awakened him from his little day dream. Turning quickly he found that his chum, Leslie Capes, was standing beside him, with a broad smile on his face.

"Made up your mind which gun you want, old fellow?" the newcomer asked, jauntily. "Or perhaps now it was some of that football stuff you were mapping out to buy?"

Dick laughed to hide the spasm that shot

through his heart; for he realized that he needed a new suit of clothes more than he did any of those fine articles so temptingly displayed.

"Well, I haven't decided just yet, Leslie," he said, lightly enough, considering what his feelings had been a moment before. "I'm glad you came along, for I was just on the point of going over to your house to see you."

"I'll wager a cookey I can guess what your errand was," remarked the other.

"Give a try then," Dick went on to say. "I don't believe you'll come within a thousand yards of it."

"Well, this is Friday afternoon, isn't it, and we got out early from school," the other boy started to explain. "That makes tomorrow Saturday, and it seems that four of us fellows have a date to get off with our horse and wagon in the morning to visit that hickory grove about seven miles up the Sweetwater, where we've heard the nuts were mighty thick this fall, and plenty still on the ground."

Leslie finished with an expectant smile, as though he really believed he must have struck the bull's-eye the first shot. He was surprised to see Dick shake his head in the negative.

"Better try again," the other told him.

"Oh! if it's as deep as all that I'll have to throw up the sponge, and own myself beaten," admitted

Leslie. "That's about the only thing I can think of; unless you've got something to tell me about that Deacon Nocker scrape the other night. Did he drop over and see your mother, Dick, after sending your cap to you by one of his store boys?"

"Not a word has been said," replied Dick, "and I was beginning to wonder what had come over Mr. Nocker, because he's usually so bitter toward boys. But the mystery has all been made clear since I met Mr. Holwell, the minister, about half an hour ago."

"Did he coax the old deacon to go easy with us, Dick? It would be just like Mr. Holwell, for he's the best friend the boys of Cliffwood ever had."

"Yes, it happened that Mr. Holwell and Harry Bartlett were talking on the morning after Hallowe'en when they saw the deacon heading for police headquarters. He told them what had happened, and how he knew who three of the boys were who had dared to enter his house at midnight and tried to give him a terrible fright."

"Whew! is that a fact, Dick? I can guess what Mr. Holwell and Harry did then."

"Yes, they were worried for fear of what the consequences might be, and finally managed to talk the deacon into giving up his idea of having us arrested for trespass and breaking into his house. Then the two got to talking over matters,

and the result was a secret meeting held that night at the parsonage."

"Why, my Uncle Henry was out that night, and I couldn't get him to tell me where he'd been!" exclaimed Leslie. "He looked mighty mysterious too, and told me to just hold my horses, and in good time I might hear something drop."

"Well," continued Dick, impressively, "at that meeting, so Mr. Holwell has just informed me, for it isn't going to be kept a secret any longer, they decided to form a Junior Department of the Y. M. C. A. so as to keep the younger boys of the town off the streets nights, by supplying them with all sorts of entertainments in the headquarters building of the association."

Despite the fact that many people were passing in both directions on that November afternoon, since they stood on the main street of bustling Cliffwood, Leslie Capes snatched off his cap and waved it wildly above his head several times.

"Bully for that!" he exclaimed. "It's the best thing that ever happened to Cliffwood since the day the old town was first started. Oh, I can see what a big help that's going to be for all the decent boys. And in the good old summer time we can have all sorts of hikes and camping trips. That is a great surprise you've rung in on me, Dick!"

"Hold on!" remarked Dick. "It isn't only the decent fellows that are going to have a chance to

join the club. Mr. Holwell believes in giving *every one* a show, even Nat Silmore, Dit Hennesy, and their crowd. And any of the boys who work in the mills can be members if they agree to the rules of the organization."

"Whew! I wonder how that will work?" said Leslie, frowning. "I mean about Nat and Dit, for they're always such trouble-makers, you know."

"Well, Mr. Holwell is willing to give them all the chances he can to make good, but you know that he isn't going to stand too much nonsense," Dick continued. "If Nat starts a racket he'll find himself outside the door in a hurry, unless I miss my guess."

"We'll soon be rid of him then," laughed the other boy, "because it's just as natural for Nat to make himself disagreeable as it is for water to run down hill. But this is great news you've been telling me, Dick. Queer that I didn't guess it must have had some connection with Mr. Holwell, because he's always thinking how he can help the boys along."

"It's going to be the beginning of a new era in Cliffwood, he says," Dick continued. "He thinks things are getting pretty near the breaking point, because for a fact the boys here have been going it strong of late. I can see that we'll have jolly times this winter in that gymnasium and the club rooms."

"As like as not Mr. Holwell will get up a whole lot of entertainments for us, such as moving pictures of an educational nature," suggested Leslie.

"He spoke of that," Dick volunteered, "and also told me we would have something of our own to do, though I don't believe he's made up his mind yet what it will be. But once I heard him tell my mother that years ago he used to belong to a traveling minstrel show, and had gone through a pack of interesting adventures while on the road. So it may be something along that order."

"That would be simply immense!" exclaimed the delighted Leslie. "And they could make you an end man, Dick. With that ventriloquist voice of yours I can see how you'd bring down the house."

"We won't cross any bridges till we come to them," laughed Dick. "I'm willing to do my part, no matter where they put me. You see, Mr. Holwell had a little talk with me about a whole lot of things, and I sort of made him a promise—never mind what it was about."

Leslie looked at his chum seriously and then went on to say:

"Mebbe I can give a pretty good guess what he said, Dick; but some other time you may take a notion to tell me. Mr. Holwell is a fine man, and if anybody can control the boys of Cliffwood, he ought to. But I've got an errand in town, so I'll

have to break away from you, expecting to see you at the house at eight sharp tomorrow morning. Then ho! for the shellbarks by the bushel, enough for a whole winter's supply."

"Don't be in such a big hurry, Leslie," urged Dick.

"What! have you got another dark secret to tell me?" demanded the other, laughingly.

Dick looked cautiously around him. Then he nodded his head.

"It's a sure enough secret this time," he observed, in a lowered voice. "Wait up a minute, because there's Deacon Nocker coming along the street, and of all the people in Cliffwood he's the last I'd want to have overhear what I'm going to tell you."

Of course, this excited the curiosity of Leslie more than ever. He managed to hold his feelings in check while the grim old storekeeper walked past. Deacon Nocker gave the two boys one malicious look, and with a sneer on his thin face said:

"Hatching up some more of your tricks, I expect. But I give you plain warning that these scandalous goings-on are not to be tolerated any longer in a respectable town like Cliffwood. Better be going home and doing your chores. Loafing on street corners never gave any boy a lift in life; but it has helped many a lad to start to the penitentiary."

Then the worthy deacon walked on with his head lifted proudly, as though he really believed he had fulfilled his duty as a Christian in warning the boys of the rocks upon which they were drifting, even though he had not stretched out a helping hand to assist them.

"The old curmudgeon!" muttered Leslie. "How he does hate all boys! No wonder his own son ran away from home years ago. Say, that big house must have seemed like a cold storage plant to that boy, for there couldn't have been anything like warmth and happiness inside of it, with Old Jed Nocker present. I'm glad he isn't any relation to me, that's all I can say."

"Listen, Leslie," Dick continued, lowering his voice still more. "You'll think it queer, I know, but all the same it's about that same boy, Amos Nocker, that I'm going to say something right now."

"But look here, Dick, didn't we hear some time ago that Amos had married, and later on died far away out West somewhere?"

"It was true too, Leslie. He married a sweet little girl, and for a time managed to support her in comfort, because Amos had turned over a new leaf, you see. Then he came down with tuberculosis, and trouble stepped in."

"Whew! that was rough," said the other, his boyish heart touched with genuine sympathy.

"And just after Amos was getting a fair start, too. But why didn't he write to his rich father and get help?"

"He did, but his letter was returned unopened," Dick explained. "In the end poor Amos Nocker died, just as we heard."

"Leaving a widow and a child."

"Just what it was, Leslie—the sweetest little woman you ever knew, and the boy is a darling if ever there was one. You see she wrote to the old man telling him about Amos' sad death, and that she and the boy were almost penniless."

"Did that touch the heart of Jed Nocker?"

"He answered her letter, and what do you think he said?" continued Dick, between his set teeth. "That as for her, he vowed never to set eyes on the face of the woman who had married his boy, thinking to come into some of his father's hard-earned money; but that if she chose to send the child on to him he would care for it. But *she* must never darken his doors with her presence."

"The cold-blooded old wretch!" burst out Leslie, indignantly. "But see here, Dick, how do you happen to know all this?"

"For the simple reason that Amos Nocker's young widow, and the child, little Billy, are over at our house right now!" came the astonishing answer that staggered the listener, and caused him to gasp as he stared at Dick.

CHAPTER V

SETTING THE FOX TRAP

"THAT's a queer thing you're telling me, Dick!" was what Leslie Capes finally observed, scanning the face of his chum closely.

"After all it isn't so very strange," explained the other. "My mother once knew a Matilda Smith, and corresponded with her for some years. She married and was Tilly's mother, it turned out, and Tilly is the girl Amos Nocker married. So among her mother's letters Tilly found the address of our folks, and seeing it was Cliffwood, where her unforgiving father-in-law lived, she wrote on."

"Oh! Then your mother had her come here and to her house, did she, Dick?"

"Just what happened, though I didn't get wind of the secret till she arrived today," Dick hastened to explain.

"But what's the game?" questioned Leslie, eagerly. "Your mother and Grandpop Horner must have something up their sleeves."

"Just what they have," admitted Frank, with flashing eyes. "And say, after seeing what a

dandy little darling that Billy is I reckon it might have a ghost of a chance of succeeding; though lots of people would laugh at the idea of a child breaking through into the flinty old heart of Jed Nocker."

"Go on and tell me what's up," urged Leslie, almost consumed with curiosity.

"Listen, then," Dick continued, mysteriously. "My mother hasn't made up her mind that Mr. Nocker is hopeless. She really believes that in secret he has suffered a whole lot for his hardness to poor Amos."

"Huh! I guess she's about the only person in town then that believes so," grumbled Leslie. "Everybody else thinks he's got no heart at all, but a frozen turnip in its place. What makes your mother believe that, Dick?"

"Well," said the other, "for one thing, she had occasion to go into his private office a week or so ago. She thought he called out 'come in' when she knocked, but when she opened the door Jed was standing there looking at a picture of poor Amos that he had on top of his rolltop desk; and he blew his nose a whole lot when he saw her. Mother says she felt sure his eyes looked watery."

Leslie gave a mocking laugh at that.

"It never could have happened, Dick, believe me!" he exclaimed. "Chances were he only had a bad cold in the head; lots of it around town at

this time of the year, and among older people especially. But you hinted at some sort of a plan that our folks had been making up."

"My mother has a strong notion, which has become a positive conviction since seeing the fine little chap, that if Old Jed could become interested in Billy, not knowing that it was his own grandchild he was beginning to care for, he might in the end consent to accepting Tilly as his daughter, and provide for them."

"H'm! sounds pretty nice, but knowing Mr. Nocker as well as I do I'm pretty shaky about the scheme working. But how could we go about it, Dick?"

"We'd have to get somebody interested who could afford to put a little money in the plan," explained Dick, hesitatingly.

"How about my Uncle Henry?" demanded the other, instantly. "He's just the one to plunge into anything of that kind, recklessly."

"I'm sure he would be glad of the chance to help," Dick went on to say, "after he had met Tilly and little Billy. And Leslie, you know the old saying, 'speak of an angel and you'll hear his wings?' Well, there comes your uncle right now."

"I'll hold him up, Dick, and you can explain the whole thing to him. Then, if you say the word, we'll all go to your house and meet Tilly Nocker and Billy. Hello! Uncle Henry, we were just

talking about you. Are you in a big hurry, or could you spare a little time to listen to something my chum Dick here wants to say?"

The gentleman spoken to was a middle-aged, pleasant-faced man, and Leslie had for years come to look upon him as his good fairy. He supplied the lad with funds, perhaps too generously, but Uncle Henry's faith in boys was deep-rooted, so that he believed they would come through all right. He looked upon them as certain to exhibit a certain number of prank-loving propensities, even as they caught the measles.

"It happens that I've got plenty of time on my hands just now, boys," he told them. "What is the trouble at present? Been getting in some farmer's orchard, and he threatens to make trouble for you if you don't pay for the damage done?"

Leslie laughed at hearing this.

"A bad guess that time, Uncle Henry," he told the gentleman, much to his relief. "We're going to cut out most of that sort of business, now that Mr. Holwell has started to organize a Boys' Department of the Y. M. C. A. Dick here wants to enlist your co-operation in a little scheme that his mother is engineering; and Uncle, I've as good as said I knew you'd jump at the chance to help."

"Thanks for your good opinion, Nephew," laughed the other. "But suppose you tell me what it's all about before I make any promises."

"Of course you know all about Amos Nocker, sir," began Dick; "and how when he died away out West, his widow wrote asking the old deacon for help, which he refused to give unless she handed over her little son to him, with a promise never to even try to see him?"

"Yes," replied Uncle Henry, gruffly, "I've heard about that, and thought it just about as mean and cold-blooded a proposition as ever was made. To think of making the poor young widow give up her child unless she wanted to starve! But then what more could you expect from Old Jed Nocker, the Icicle of Cliffwood?"

"Well, both Tilly and her child, little Billy, are over at our house right now," continued Dick, eagerly. "Of course, it's a dead secret, and you two are the only ones who know it. She's meaning to go under the name of Mrs. Smith, you see."

Uncle Henry looked decidedly interested.

"Tell me what's in the wind, Dick, for I believe you said your mother had some sort of scheme."

"It's just this way, sir," explained Dick. "You know the Brandon place next door to the deacon's is empty, and for rent, furnished or empty. My mother thought that if Tilly took that house, and just by accident, you see, little Billy managed to creep through a hole in the fence between the places, and Mr. Nocker happened to run across him, he might become interested in the child."

"Whew! that's the game, is it?" exclaimed Leslie.

Uncle Henry seemed to ponder over it for a full minute or so.

"There's a chance it might work," he finally admitted; "though a whole lot would depend on the lad himself, as well as the state Old Jed has reached. Some profess to believe he's beginning to break under the strain. For myself I must confess I've seen no signs of it so far; he's just as hard as ever."

"Well, it might turn out that he's trying to keep up a brave face even when he's near breaking down," said Dick, quickly. "My mother surprised him looking at a picture of Amos one day, and she is sure his eyes were wet. And as far as little Billy is concerned, sir, if you come over to our house and meet him, I think you'll say he can turn the trick, if anything can."

"Is he such a darling, then?" asked Uncle Henry, who, although an old bachelor himself, had a fondness for children.

"Wait till you see him, and then tell me, sir," replied Dick, confidently.

"All right, we'll go over with you now if you say so, Dick," the generous gentleman hastened to say.

"And after you've met Tilly and her little boy, sir," continued Dick, anxious to strike while the

iron was hot, "if you think well of the scheme will you go and secure the Brandon house for a month, so they can move in tomorrow?"

"I'll be only too glad to do that, my boy," replied Uncle Henry, laying a hand affectionately on a shoulder of each of the chums, while he beamed down upon the flushed face of Dick through his glasses. "It would be well worth a month's rent to me, or ten months for that matter, if I could have a hand in breaking up that iron will of Old Jed Nocker, and making him a little bit human."

"How about your errand, Leslie, can it wait?" asked Dick.

"Shucks! It'll have to," laughed the other; "because you see I was only going to have a hair-cut, and what are a few stray locks between friends. Come on, let's get a move on. I'm wild to see that little Billy and his mother."

They were not long in reaching the white cottage near the bank of the murmuring river where Dick, his small sister Sue, his mother, and the old pensioner lived.

When Dick threw open the door and ushered his two companions into the room they stood there and stared. A handsome little curly-haired boy of about three was playing horse with a chair which he straddled like a trooper. Leslie thought he had never set eyes on a more winning little chap, and

stock in Dick's plan immediately sprang up far above par in his mind.

Tilly Nocker jumped to her feet as they entered. She was a pretty young woman, perhaps too sad for one of her tender years. Uncle Henry became interested in her immediately, for he saw that she had suffered.

Dick's mother and grandfather were also present. The former was worthy of any boy's love, for her whole disposition was that of a gentle, trusting woman. As for the veteran of the Civil War, with his shock of white hair coming down almost to his shoulders, and his clean-cut features, he made a striking picture.

"Mother, I've brought Leslie and Uncle Henry over to meet them!" burst out Dick. "They know what we plan to do, and Uncle Henry seems to be pretty much in favor of it already."

"Without saying another word," remarked the gentleman, quickly, "I want to tell you I think it well worth trying. If Mr. Nocker can resist that winsome little chap then he's got a lump of ice in place of a heart. I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Nocker, and let me tell you that in all Cliffwood you couldn't have found a better haven of rest than right here in Mrs. Horner's cottage."

He shook hands with Tilly, and then hurried over to make the acquaintance of little Billy. While Uncle Henry had always been deeply in-

terested in children, he could not remember the time he had ever been so drawn to a bright-faced little chap as he was now.

Deep down in his heart he was saying something like this:

"If the old skinflint doesn't come to time I've got a good notion to adopt them both myself, and perhaps I will yet. One thing sure, they must never come to want. Why, it would be worth all it cost just to have that manly little chap around all the time."

Before Dick and his uncle were ready to go it had all been settled.

"I'll take a short lease on the Brandon place inside of half an hour," announced Uncle Henry, positively, which showed that he was a man who never allowed the grass to grow under his feet when he had an object in view. "You can get settled tomorrow. We'll keep the secret sacredly, and the town will only know you as Mrs. Smith. Then some time next week start the machinery moving."

After Uncle Henry had hurried away to fulfill his part in the contract, Dick and Leslie stood outside the door to exchange a few words ere the latter walked off.

"The trap is set," Leslie said, "and now we'll see if the cunning old fox can be tempted to take the bait."

CHAPTER VI

TAKING THE BAIT

WHEN the great news concerning the boys of Cliffwood had circulated around town during the next few days it created no end of talk. Everywhere it caused the most intense excitement among the rising generation. Parents in particular commended the plan of Mr. Holwell as a means for gripping the restless activities of the town boys, and turning them into some more useful channel than loitering about the streets at night and playing all sorts of practical jokes.

At school it was the subject of talk wherever two or three fellows came together on the campus, or while in the classrooms during intermission.

Nearly every boy was in favor of the scheme. They talked it over and saw all manner of splendid possibilities looming up, for not only the long evenings of the coming winter but even during the spring and summer months.

"I've handed in my application," announced Phil Harkness, as with several other fellows he stood in the school basement keeping warm near

the furnace, while he munched some lunch purchased at the counter. "I hope nothing blocks me in joining the Juniors, because I expect they're going to have great times."

"Mighty few fellows try to throw cold water on the idea," ventured Dan Fenwick; "unless it's Nat Silmore and Dit Hennesy, who've gone around sneering, and saying it's all a bunk game on the part of Mr. Holwell and Harry Bartlett to keep boys from having good times playing tricks."

"Yes, but even they're talking of applying for admission," spoke up Clint Babbett; "and it wouldn't surprise me if we had a heap of trouble with that crowd. If they get in to the first meeting which has been called for tomorrow night, look out for squalls, that's all."

"Mr. Holwell thinks they are not as black as they're painted," suggested Peg Fosdick. "But that's because he's got such a big heart he just can't decide that any sort of boy is beyond redemption."

"If they come in," asserted Dan, vigorously, "there'll be a rumpus, as sure as you're born. I wish there were going to be some of the Seniors present, but I understand that it's an off night for them, and that only Mr. Holwell, with perhaps Harry Bartlett, can be present at the first meeting."

"Oh! well, where do we all come in?" demanded Peg, puffing out his chest in a vainglorious fashion. "We'll chase that crowd out in a hurry if they get too gay. Besides, police headquarters is close by, and Mr. Holwell could call them up on the 'phone if it got too smoky."

"I understand that nearly two dozen applications are already in," remarked Phil, "so there ought to be something of a crowd out at the meeting. I'm wild to know just what the plans are."

"First of all," said Peg, "there's going to be a small initiation fee, and monthly dues, just to help pay expenses, and make the boys feel it isn't a charity. That's Mr. Holwell's idea; he doesn't believe boys like to be given everything. And one of the rules is going to be that they must earn the amount of their entering fee and dues."

"Wow! I see my finish then," groaned Andy Hale; "because this morning my dad tempted me with an offer to saw and split a cord or two of wood that's piled up in our back yard. Now I'll just *have* to agree, if he'll advance the pay to me."

"Some of the boys," explained Phil, "are going to be given a chance to do certain things about the Y. M. C. A. building, such as taking care of the furnace, cleaning windows at odd hours, and the like."

"A good idea, too," admitted Peg, "because some of the fellows who work in the mills would

want to join us, you see, and they couldn't afford to stand for the admittance fee."

"Uncle Henry Capes has let it be known that he stands ready to assist any worthy boy he thinks is in dead earnest, and who can't afford the price," announced Leslie.

"Bully for your uncle, Leslie; he's all right!" cried Peg, enthusiastically.

"Here's another thing, fellows, I'm meaning to bring up the first chance I get after the Boys' Department is well started," said Phil. "You know all of us have been a whole lot annoyed by Mr. Loft, the librarian, who believes all boys' books should be thrown out of our Public Library, and only volumes along educational lines kept there."

"That's right," broke in Dan, eagerly. "I never call for a book that I've wanted to read but that he tried to show me the folly of indulging in such silly nonsense as he calls it. Guess the high-brow Mr. Loft never was a boy himself. He must have been fed on Greek grammar and ancient history when he was six years old. He makes me tired, that's what. But go on and tell us what you've been thinking up, Phil."

"All right, I will, fellows," replied the one spoken to. "In the beginning I want to say I've already talked the matter over with Mr. Holwell, Harry Bartlett, and Leslie's Uncle Henry, and all of them took to the idea first rate."

"Go on, and let's hear!" called out several of the more impatient lads as they clustered around the speaker.

"Listen then," said Phil, impressively. "After we get the Junior Club well started the idea is to have a library of our own, containing only such books as Mr. Holwell will have passed upon as being the right sort for boys to read. These can be filled with pleasing adventure such as all boys want, and at the same time be of a healthy, uplifting nature, and all our own."

"Fine!" exclaimed Dan Fenwick, who was a great reader of stories of all sorts.

"We could buy the books ourselves with money we earned or had given to us," declared Clint Babbett. "I know for one thing my mother will take to the scheme right away, because she hates to have me fetch home some of the greasy looking books from the public library. You see, she says you never can tell where they've been the week before; mebbe in a house where they have diphtheria or some sort of catching disease. Germs she hates the worst kind. Yes, she'll be only too glad to help out."

From all sides the idea was commended. No one had ever thought of such an original scheme before, though some of the boys had pretty extensive libraries of their own covering shelves of space in their dens at home, and consisting, for the

most part, of modern books for growing lads, such as the well-meaning but short-sighted librarian disliked to see them taking from the public institution.

Dick, coming along just then, was told of the new scheme.

"I think it's a good idea of yours, Phil," he declared as soon as it had been explained to him. "Like the rest of you I've grown tired of having Mr. Loft forever looking so disgusted whenever I ask for a book by my favorite writer who knows boys, and writes straight down into their hearts."

"Let them keep the library just for works of educational value if they want," asserted the proud originator of the idea; "although few people think that's the only function for a public institution."

"Most boys get all the instruction they need in school," asserted Peg; "and to read a good boy's book, something along the line of outdoor sports, is one of their best recreations. Think of how every one of us, yes and our daddies and grandfathers, as well, have poured over such classics as Robinson Crusoe and Swiss Family Robinson."

"Sure thing," added Dick, convincingly, "and a good book keeps a boy from getting into heaps of mischief; because he's just *got* to be doing something. But there goes the bell, fellows. Hope to see all of you on hand at the first meeting of the Junior Organization."

"We'll be there, you can bet, Dick!" cried Peg, as he limped after the rest to resume his studies.

That afternoon Leslie Capes caught up with Dick as the latter was hastening home from school.

"I'm in a hurry to get home, Leslie," said the latter, "but I wish you'd keep me company part of the way. Somehow or other I haven't had much chance to get a few words with you on the sly so as to tell you how our little plan is moving along."

"I'm just burning up with curiosity to know about that same, Dick. Has Old Nocker run across little Billy yet?"

"He certainly has," replied Dick, promptly. "It happened yesterday. I showed Billy the very hole in the dividing fence through which we crawled on the Hallowe'en night, and, knowing Mr. Nocker was home at the time, I hid near so as to watch and see what happened."

"Well, please go on, Dick; you've got me all worked up," pleaded Leslie.

"Little Billy understood what he was to do, and wandered around the place, by degrees getting nearer and nearer the house. Then all at once I saw the old deacon hurrying out toward him. He looked cross, as if he meant to order the child off his grounds, and complain, in the bargain, to his parents if he ever trespassed again."

"But he didn't, Dick; I know you're going to say he didn't," urged Leslie.

"Well, I could see him talking to little Billy for a while," Dick went on. "Then he even bent down so as to get closer to him. Say, I warrant you there was something queer happening inside his frosty old heart just then. Perhaps he could see some familiar glimpse in little Billy's blue eyes that made him think of the boy he once had."

"What do you think he could have said to Billy?" asked Leslie.

"Oh! I saw him pointing toward the Brandon house through the trees, for with the leaves off he could get a glimpse of it from where he stood. So I knew he must be asking if the little curly-head lived there."

"Yes, go on, Dick."

"Finally, I saw Billy start to come back, and would you believe it Old Jed actually laid a hand on his mop of golden hair. Like as not that was the first time he'd ever willingly touched a child since his Amos was a kid."

"Splendid, Dick! Things seem to be working along just as we planned them, don't they?"

"When the little boy walked away, Old Jed stood and stared after him. Then I saw him shake his head and go back in the direction of the house. But three times he turned and looked after Billy until the kid was lost to sight."

"And did you manage to find out what he said to the child, Dick?"

"Partly," came the reply. "Billy told us the nice old gentleman had asked him who he was, and about his folks. Then as Billy was coming away Old Jed told him he must come again, and see him another day—tomorrow if it was pleasant."

At that Leslie almost doubled up.

"The sly old fox has swallowed the bait, Dick!" he exclaimed, between laughs. "All you have to do now is to let him have rope enough, and he'll be caught as neat as you please. When he's got to just *yearn* for little Billy, it'll be time to pull the string, and tell him he can only have the child's company on condition that the mother is equally welcome in his home."

"I think myself that things begin to look kind of promising," admitted Dick. "You must be sure to tell Uncle Henry all about it."

"I certainly will," continued Leslie, "and my mother as well, because she's in the secret too. But about that meeting called for tomorrow night—have you heard that Nat and several of his cronies mean to attend?"

"If they do, it'll be to make trouble for the rest of us, for they'll try to break the meeting up," said Dick, vehemently. "It would be only right if Mr. Holwell had the police chief present to keep things serene; but I suppose that wouldn't look nice, seeing we would be in the Y. M. C. A. rooms."

CHAPTER VII

ORGANIZING THE BOYS' DEPARTMENT

ALONG about a quarter to eight on the evening of the following day a number of eager lads might have been seen making their way in the direction of the central part of town.

The building which had been taken for the use of the now firmly established Y. M. C. A. was fairly well adapted to the purpose, though a few changes had been made to suit the needs of the association.

It was a substantial residence, with a hall in the center, and large rooms on either side. The extensive cellar had been made into a splendid gymnasium, where basket ball as well could be played on occasion.

The double parlor made an excellent hall where entertainments were given, consisting of lectures and educational motion pictures. On the other side were two pleasant rooms where games, such as dominoes, chess and checkers, could be indulged in.

Altogether, it was a most comfortable place to

spend the winter evenings. Even a billiard and a pool table had been installed, with the idea of keeping the young men from patronizing rooms where strong drink was apt to be sold. Better still, there was now a new bowling alley being built as an addition to the plant, which would prove unusually attractive to many fond of rolling.

A number of boys traveling toward this center of interest came together at some little distance away. Dick nudged his chum, Leslie, when he saw that Nat Silmore and two of his chosen friends made up the other detachment.

Nat seemed to be in a hilarious mood. Evidently, he was pleased over something or other, and whenever he laughed his cronies in duty bound joined in the merriment.

"Seems like we're all out on the same errand this beautiful night, eh, Dick?" he remarked, with a chuckle, as the two parties merged in one, and pushed on toward the building with its many lights.

"Everybody's doing it!" chanted Dit Hennesy, at which the trio gave a hearty laugh, and slapped one another roughly on the back, as though they were fairly bubbling over with glee, for some reason or other.

Dick did not exactly like the signs. He had seen Nat in this condition before, and to his observing mind it always presaged some sort of outbreak that had a bold prank attached to it.

His mind went back to a former occasion, when the big, overgrown boy had kept up his chuckling, though there seemed nothing humorous in the eyes of others; yet all of a sudden every light in the town hall had gone out, leaving Polly Cramer, who was in the midst of her graduation essay, almost hysterical with fright.

But then there was no necessity to pick a quarrel with Nat. Surely Mr. Holwell and big Harry Bartlett ought to be able to manage a wild team like Nat and Dit.

"Well, this is a great night for the boys of Cliffwood, according to my notion," Dick remarked. "I'm only sorry for the fellows who can't manage to get into the new organization, for it promises to be a big thing."

"Think so, do you?" sneered Nat. "Well, 'cording to my mind there's plenty of good times floatin' all around, and you don't have to sneeze every time Harry Bartlett or the minister takes snuff, to find 'em."

"But you're going in tonight, aren't you?" asked Dan Fenwick, who was tagging along at the heels of Dick and Leslie.

"Sure we are," replied the other, boisterously. "We took a notion we'd like to hear what's on tap. Mebbe we'll condescend to hand in our names along with the mob if it sounds good to us; mebbe we won't. It all depends."

There was nothing funny about these words of Nat's, and yet the other two boys thought fit to start laughing again as though they could not contain themselves.

"Oh! you'll have to please yourselves about that, I guess, Nat," observed Dick, carelessly. "Nobody is going to be coaxed to join the club, as I understand it. So far as we've heard the plan outlined, I should say that the fellow who declines to enroll and obey the few rules is going to miss heaps of good times this winter."

"Huh! mebbe now you're givin' me a sly dig, Dick Horner," grunted Nat, "when you talk 'bout obeying rules."

"No more than I was giving myself a knock, Nat, because I've been a pretty lively customer and hard to curb, I own up. But if the cap fits, put it on, because there *are* going to be rules, and Mr. Holwell has said distinctly that unless they're lived up to no fellow will be allowed to remain a member, even if he does join."

"Strikes me Mr. Holwell is goin' to bite off more'n he can chew this time," observed Nat, which started another series of loud chuckles from his "echoes."

"They mean trouble as sure as two and two are four," whispered Leslie into Dick's ear, as the three rough fellows fell back a few paces, apparently to hold a little confab of their own.

"Let them start a rough-house prank if they want to," said Dick, confidently. "I miss my guess if Mr. Holwell isn't able to handle the crowd. He used to be on the college football squad years ago, and knows a thing or two about hustling a disturber out of a meeting, even if he is a minister."

"If you asked me what I thought," added Dan, eagerly, "I'd say there's a little surprise waiting up for Nathan this very night; and for one I'll be tickled half to death when it happens. It's been due some time now, I expect."

"Well, here we are at the place," remarked Dick; "so let's forget all about such a thing as trouble."

When the boys found themselves inside the building it was to meet a score of their school-mates, all waiting in the big auditorium for the meeting to be called to order. In the upper part of the house were a couple of quiet reading rooms for those who did not wish to be disturbed by such noise as arose from the lovers of games. There were also accommodations for temporary shelter, where several young men could room during their search for work.

Mr. Holwell and Harry Bartlett were present, looking more than gratified over such a good turnout on the part of the boys of Cliffwood. The attendance seemed to insure the ultimate success of their new undertaking.

"Of course we must expect to meet with obstacles," the minister was saying to his right-hand man; "perhaps plenty of them; for nothing worth while can be attained without great efforts. But with a splendid body of eager boys back of us there can be no such word as fail in our lexicon."

When eight o'clock came, the meeting was promptly called to order by Mr. Holwell. He found himself faced by nearly a score and a half of boys, most of them anxious to qualify for membership in the new organization.

Some of them with older brothers in the regular Y. M. C. A. had long envied the good times the Seniors seemed to have under that hospitable roof. Now that a chance had come whereby they too were to be given a share in the pleasures and entertainments that enlivened the dull winter months there was no lack of enthusiasm exhibited on every hand.

Nat Silmore and his cronies kept close together. Dick now and then cast a look in their direction, and wondered if they really would have the nerve to try and give Mr. Holwell trouble. Knowing the effrontery of Nat so well, he had a strong suspicion that something was brewing.

"Most of you already know the main object of this meeting," said Mr. Holwell, after his upraised hand had called for silence. "Some of us a bit ago came to the conclusion that the growing boys

of Cliffwood had been neglected too long, and that it was high time something was done to give them much more pleasure than can be found on the streets of nights. So we are now about to offer all of you the opportunity of becoming junior members of the Y. M. C. A."

At that Dick led the cheering, and quite a tumult arose. It was to be noticed, however, that Nat and his two followers did not join in the applause. Dick wondered why this should be; he was already suspicious of them, for he could see Dit nudging Nat in the ribs and grinning, whereupon the big fellow shook his head, as though he might be curbing the impatience of his followers.

When Mr. Holwell elevated his hand again the cheering stopped as if by magic. Every fellow leaned forward and listened to hear what was coming next.

"Any boy living in or around Cliffwood can become a member in full standing of our Junior Organization," continued the minister, "provided he pays an initiation fee of two dollars, earned by himself, and the monthly dues of twenty-five cents. He must be between the ages of eight and eighteen years of age, and will have to subscribe to the few general rules whereby he promises to behave himself as becomes a member of the Y. M. C. A. These rules you will find on the cards I shall give out later on."

As he paused it gave the assembly another chance to let loose with three cheers. Mr. Holwell did not try to stop them. He knew that boys must find a vent for their enthusiasm in some fashion, when too full to keep still.

"Those who join will be entitled to nearly all the privileges of this building, such as the gymnasium on certain occasions, the swimming pool that, with the bowling alleys, is being fitted up for immediate use; and will be allowed to attend such lectures and entertainments as are considered suitable for boys of their age."

A third whirlwind of applause interrupted the speaker. That manifestation of approval pleased the big-hearted minister more than anything else. He knew that he had secured a firm hold on the hearts and affections of most of these lively lads; and no doubt had visions of the great good his latest plan was bound to bring about for the younger generation of Cliffwood.

"As time passes," he went on to tell them, "there will arise various ways of enlisting your hearty cooperation in the work. I have already suggested one scheme that I am pleased to say seems to have met the approval of the committee in charge of entertainments.

"Perhaps all of you may not know that in my younger years, before I ever thought of preaching the Gospel, I belonged to a minstrel company

that was more or less of a success in its traveling career. Now my plan is to have the boys of the Y. M. C. A. give a refined show of this sort, in which nearly every one of you can take some part. It is also proposed to offer a cash prize of twenty-five dollars in gold to the boy who can get up the best original farce suited for minstrel work, the entertainment committee being the judges. More particulars of this plan will be given out at the meeting of the club next week."

"Will every member be permitted to enter this competition, sir?" asked Dick.

"There will be no restriction," continued Mr. Holwell, "and every boy who belongs to the junior league of the association is entitled to try for the reward. Only it must be understood that all work must be original. And now if you are ready to register your names as candidates for acceptance we will see how many can be enrolled tonight."

As before, there were cheers from the boys, but this time the din became really frightful. Nat and his two cronies had produced harsh sirens from their pockets, and persisted in blowing them to the utmost extent of their lungs.

In vain Mr. Holwell and Harry Bartlett held up their hands to implore silence. Most of the boys stopped cheering, but the three kept up their racket as though bent on breaking up the meeting then and there.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHTING PARSON

"SILENCE!"

Dick could see Mr. Holwell's lips form this word, but his voice was utterly unable to rise above the horrible din produced by the three hoarse sirens blown in company, with might and main by the plotters. Nat and his companions were turning red in the face with their efforts, yet gave no sign of slowing up.

Leslie gripped Dick's arm. He was furious with indignation, and had Dick given him the signal, no doubt he stood ready to hurl himself on the nearest disturber of the meeting, and try to snatch the instrument of ear torture from his grasp.

Apparently, the minister had reached the end of his patience. He doubtless realized that this din was not occasioned through simple boyish enthusiasm, but must mark a well-arranged plot to break up the first meeting of the Boys' Department.

The very fact that Nat led the disturbers of

the peace was highly significant, for the Silmore boy's reputation was anything but savory in the annals of Cliffwood's rising generation.

If Nat counted on Mr. Holwell being a man of peace because he wore the garb of a minister, he made one of the greatest mistakes of his life. Those who knew the reverend gentleman better could have told him that for a man of his years he was as fine an athlete as could be found in that section of the country.

Harry Bartlett was now alongside Mr. Holwell. His face was white with indignation, and his eyes sparkled dangerously. Watching anxiously, Dick saw the minister suddenly turn toward the Y. M. C. A. leader, and nod his head. He may have spoken something at the same time, though only Harry heard it.

Promptly the two of them pounced upon Nat and Dit, who, though taken somewhat by surprise, made a desperate resistance. They were as pigmies in the hands of the two men, who hustled them toward the door in great shape, accompanied by the loud cheers of the assembled boys.

The third young ruffian, seeing Dick and Leslie making in his direction, promptly threw up his arms to indicate that he surrendered, and then bolted for the exit.

When he reached the door, Mr. Holwell held up a hand again to call for silence, and then sternly

addressed the boy who was squirming in his iron grip, amazed at having been handled so vigorously by the man of peace.

"If any of you give me the least trouble again tonight," was what he told Nat, "I promise to call the Chief of Police up on the 'phone, and have him lock you up at the station. And you can never enter these doors again as a prospective member of the Boys' League until you have written me an abject apology for your outrageous conduct tonight. Now be off with you!"

With that he gave Nat a push and sent him outside the open door. Nat immediately took to his heels, in which act he was quickly copied by his two running mates. Dick saw him turn and look back over his shoulder as he ran away, and wondered whether the fist he shook in the air could have been intended as a threat for himself or Mr. Holwell.

Just then, however, he gave the matter no further thought, for he was too full of excitement to bother about small things like Nat Silmore's resentment.

The boys once more trooped into the room and resumed their seats. Mr. Holwell looked as calm as ever, though he and Harry Bartlett exchanged a humorous smile or two. Indeed, Dick found himself wondering if the elder gentleman might not really have enjoyed forgetting his peaceful

calling for a brief moment, and proving himself a muscular Christian, ready to stand up for the right.

The names were taken down in regular order, for the boys proved eager to enter themselves as prospective members of the new organization. Many had come provided with the money for the small initiation fee; others were promised a chance to earn it in due time, and entered under that arrangement.

"I do not want a single boy present to feel that he is being debarred from joining tonight," Mr. Holwell announced, on seeing several hang back. "Be frank with me, and tell me what you aim to do so as to earn the amount necessary to pay your initiation fee. I have some plans arranged, through the kindness of several friends, and no lad need lack for a chance to enlist if he wants to become one of us."

It ended in every fellow having his name taken down. A number knew of others not present who were deeply interested, and, of course, they were enjoined to act as missionaries, so as to lengthen the roster of the Boys' Club.

"I'd be only too well pleased," said Mr. Holwell, after all these details had been settled, "if every boy of a suitable age in and around Cliffwood belonged to this new association, because I feel sure it is bound to afford you all some of the

happiest evenings of your lives. We intend to do everything within reason to make this a pleasant home for our boys, and in return only ask them to deal candidly with us. We put you on your honor to stand by the rules, and ask nothing beyond that."

The meeting broke up by nine o'clock, for some of the boys were young, and their parents would not care to have them out later than this. Dick and Leslie walked homeward together, for they did not live far away from one another. Dan had been compelled to hurry off, as there was company at his house, with something of a "feast" so dear to the heart of the average boy, which he did not care to miss.

"Well, what do you think of the prospects of the new organization?" asked Leslie, as he and Dick walked along, arm in arm.

"Bully!" exclaimed the other, with just such enthusiasm as one of his nature would be expected to display. "Twenty-six names on the roll call already, and more coming. It's already a big success, and Mr. Holwell looks as proud as if he'd won a prize."

"He's a fine man, Dick, a splendid man!" declared Leslie. "I always felt that he was the best friend the boys of this town ever had. But say, I was never so tickled in all my life as when he grabbed Nat by the scruff of his coat, and yanked

him along to the door. Why, Nat, big bully as he is, was like a pullet in the grip of Mr. Holwell."

"And did you see how the minister's eyes flashed when he was taking Nat across the floor?" burst out Dick, with a chuckle of glee. "I guess just for that minute he must have forgotten all about his calling, and was just plain Tom Holwell again, left tackle of the Princeton football squad of years ago. Wow! it was rich, let me tell you."

Leslie seemed to be just as much amused as his chum, for he too laughed heartily as they tramped along. The minister had made a new place for himself that night, strange to say, in the hearts of numerous boys.

"And don't forget," continued Dick, "that Harry Bartlett was right in the same class with Mr. Holwell. The way he jumped on Dit and yanked him out of his seat was good for sore eyes. Why, I picked up Dit's siren from the floor, where he dropped it in his big scare. Guess they didn't think that gun was loaded, and when it went off with a bang, they got a shock all right!"

"How about that prize of twenty-five dollars to be offered for the best original black-face farce, Dick; think of having a look-in there?" asked Leslie, who happened to know that the other occasionally indulged in concocting stories, and, indeed, had always been considered the best composition writer in the Cliffwood schools.

"I haven't thought much about that yet," replied Dick, slowly. "I must say it sounds good to me. I believe I could get up a farce that would be full of fun, and clean fun at that. And Leslie, that money would come in mighty handy to me. I really need a new suit for one thing, and Grand-pop's pension spreads out pretty thin when it has to cover so much."

"But every time I mention the fact that my Uncle Henry would be just tickled to lend you any sum you wanted, Dick——"

"That's enough, Leslie," hastily interrupted the other boy, laying a hand on his chum's arm, while his voice trembled a little, though in the darkness no one could see the tears that gathered in his eyes. "I told you before I couldn't come down to accepting charity, for that's what it would really be, though both of you are mighty kind to offer such a thing."

"Only a loan, Dick, you know; and you shouldn't be so touchy over it."

"Excuse me, Leslie," said Dick, drawing in a long breath. "Perhaps most fellows would look at it that way, and accept your offer only too gladly. I might too if it was for my mother, or Sue; but not for myself. I'd rather go in patched clothes all my life than knuckle down. Oh, yes, I am proud, and perhaps foolish, but I just can't help it, so don't say any more."

Evidently, Leslie knew his chum well enough to feel certain that argument would not change his determination, once he had set his mind on a certain course. On that account then, Leslie dropped the subject, though it was often troubling him; and he hoped some way would yet be found whereby the Horner family might be assisted without Dick feeling that he was an object of charity.

"What's the report from the Brandon place to-night, Dick?" he asked, in order to turn the conversation into another channel, as well as satisfy his own curiosity.

"Everything is moving along as fine as silk," his chum replied, cheerfully.

"Old Jed has seen little Billy again then, has he?" continued Leslie.

"Not a day passes during this fine weather but they meet," he was told. "Why, it seems to me the old man hurries home early in the afternoon more than he used to do, just as if he was looking forward to seeing the little chap come along through the bushes."

"Oh! I hope it turns out all right in the end," said Leslie. "I was telling my mother what we'd done, for she will keep it a secret, believe me."

"What did she think of the plan?" demanded Dick, anxiously, for he had considerable respect for the opinions of his chum's mother.

"Why," replied the other boy, quickly, "she took to it right from the start, and said it was just the finest plan she had ever heard of."

"Well," continued Dick, confidently, "it's Mr. Nocker's last chance to come in out of the wet."

"Listen!" exclaimed Leslie, just then, clutching his chum's coat sleeve.

"What did you hear?" asked the other.

"I thought it was a chuckle," replied Leslie, "but I guess it must have been an engine whistling away over at the Barrtown crossing. You see this is the only lonely place we've got to pass on the way home, and if those fellows training with Nat should take a notion to lay for us, it'd be around this section."

"What gives you the idea they'd bother doing that?" demanded Dick, who himself had been thinking along the same lines.

"Oh! well, it'd be just like Nat to want to have revenge on *somebody* for being thrown out of the meeting tonight. And I happen to know he hates you more than he does any other boy in Cliffwood. Better edge a little further away from that bunch of bushes, Dick. There, what did I tell you?"

Leslie's last words were drowned in a series of harsh cries that sprang from a party of boyish figures breaking from the suspicious bushes, and leaping toward the two who were on the road leading to their separate homes.

CHAPTER IX

IN SELF-DEFENSE

"LOOK out, Dick; here's trouble!" burst from the lips of Leslie Capes, as he saw the dim forms of several boys rushing toward him and his chum.

Neither of them seemed to think of turning and running away. Perhaps it was not in their natures to flee from such a visible danger as now confronted them; for a boy has a peculiar idea of what constitutes his sense of honor, and "showing the white feather" is usually considered next door to cowardly.

Besides, they easily guessed the identity of the fellows who aimed to attack them. In the first place they were three in number, and both Dick and Leslie remembered that Nat Silmore had had two of his cronies with him when ejected so forcibly from the Y. M. C. A. building.

It was true that the assailants had tried to conceal part of their faces with their handkerchiefs, a trick they may have learned from seeing it done in moving pictures of Western holdups. Dit had a peculiar way of hunching himself along as he

ran, with one shoulder in advance of his body, and this trait was so well known to his schoolmates that Dick quickly recognized it now.

As has been said before, it was rather dark where the ambushade had been laid. The bare bushes were dense, and several trees shut out such light as the stars dotting the sky overhead chanced to give.

Both boys drew themselves up in a position of self-defense. They had not done anything to invite this treacherous attack on the part of Nat's crowd; and at the same time they scorned to flee, with the jeers of the enemy ringing in their ears.

Indeed, there was not much time given them to lay any elaborate plan of campaign. Hardly had they backed up against each other, so as to show a united front, than the enemy launched its attack.

Nat must have forgotten such lessons as he had learned on the football field, regarding the force and value of a "flying wedge," for all of them came along in a string, each fellow for himself.

In that way it was easier for the two who were on the defensive to hold their ground. Both boys were fairly well versed in boxing, for athletics had always been a favorite amusement with them.

"That's one for you!" snapped Dick, as he delivered a blow with all his might, that hurled the leading figure back several paces.

"Oh!" this fellow was heard to exclaim, as he hastily put his hand up to his face, perhaps to ascertain whether his nose had started to bleeding.

Meanwhile, the other two had closed in, and there began a swift exchange of blows in which Dick and Leslie seemed able to hold their own, though one of the assailants, undoubtedly Nat, loomed up almost a head above either of them, and had an extra long reach.

He was so clumsy in his fighting, however, that he could not duck fast enough to avoid severe punishment, and every time Dick landed a blow he could hear Nat give a grunt, as of mingled surprise and pain.

Of course, the two who were acting on the defensive did not come off unscathed in such a grueling contest. They stopped numerous uppercuts with their bodies, but through their knowledge of boxing managed to avoid the worst of the punishment.

For a full minute it was a pretty lively affair all around. The first fellow had come out of his daze, after receiving that severe jolt; and, burning with a desire to retaliate, was trying to work around so as to attack the enemy in the rear, while his comrades held their attention in front.

Things might have gone somewhat hard with Dick and his chum, for the conflict was uneven, the odds in favor of the foe. Neither of them

dreamed of shouting out at the top of their lungs, calling for help. Indeed, no doubt they would much rather have taken a beating than to exhibit such weakness.

It was just at this stage of the struggle, when things were looking a little gloomy for the chums, that Leslie happened to strike his foot against something lying on the ground.

He could not see what it was, but some intuition told him he would be well paid if he could find a chance to suddenly stoop, and groping with his hand, investigate.

When his eager fingers closed upon quite a stout paling that must have been knocked from the weather-beaten fence near by, he felt like giving a whoop of sheer delight.

It was all in the game, and Leslie knew no reason why he should not avail himself of this splendid opportunity for evening the score. Three against two seemed heavy odds, according to his mind; and really that paling must have been lying there for just the purpose to which he now meant to put it.

Giving another cry of delight he proceeded to assail the astonished and bewildered trio. Every time the cudgel descended there was a howl of pain, and it was wonderful how quickly the enthusiasm of the three assailants oozed out. As Leslie continued to belabor them right and left

they lost all desire to attack, and thought only of beating a rapid retreat.

The patter of their fleeing footsteps died away in the near distance, and the two panting chums held the battlefield in triumph.

"Wow! that was lively while it lasted, I tell you!" exclaimed Leslie, between puffs. "I'm only sorry I didn't get in as many hard licks on Nat as I wanted. But he dodged after that first crack."

"That was a lucky find of yours, I must say!" declared Dick. "You'd better keep that old pal-ing and hang it up in your den, decorated with a blue ribbon, for it certainly took the cake."

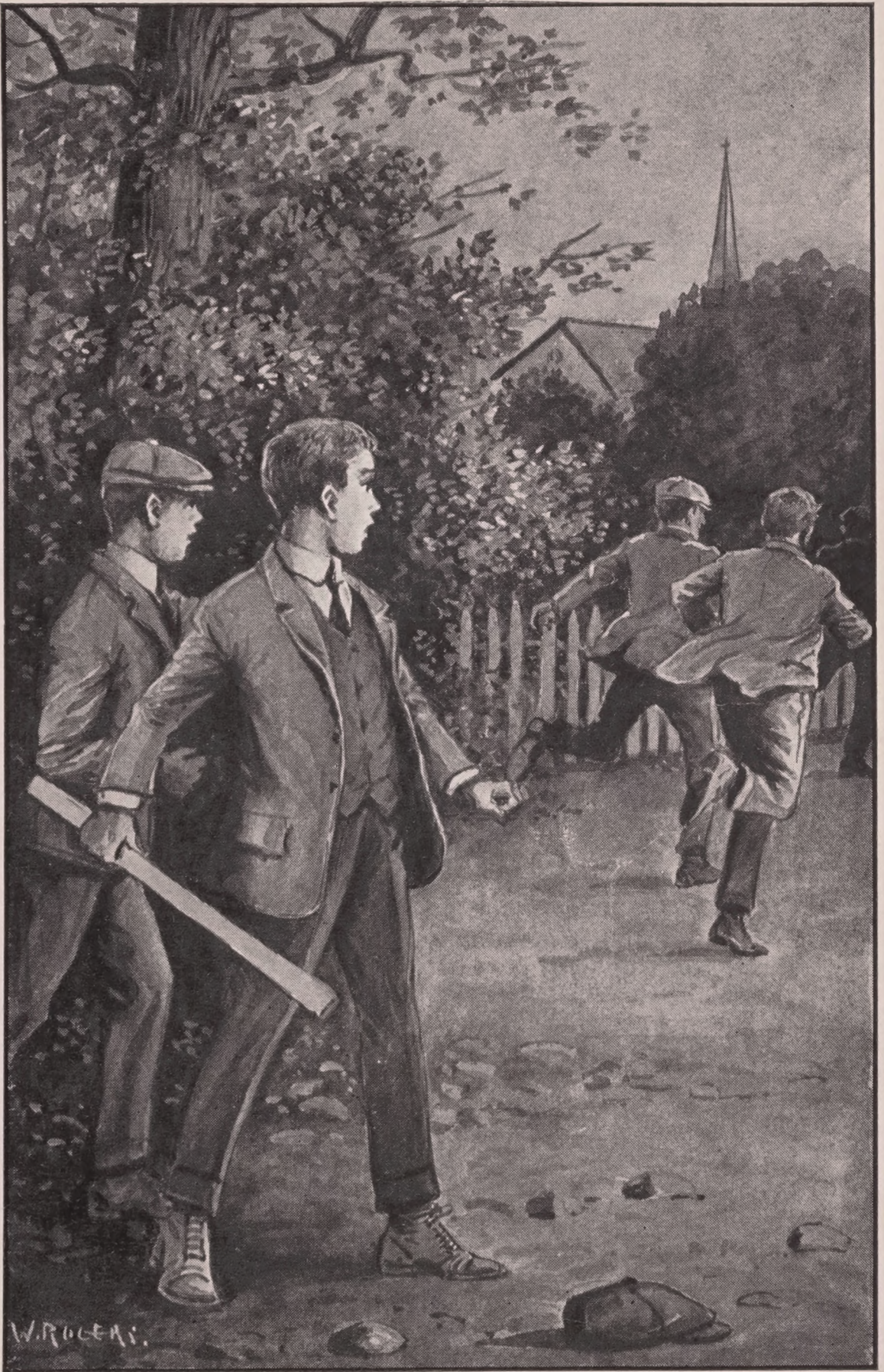
"We'd have fared badly only for my luck in running across it, I'm afraid," ventured Leslie, caressing his "lucky find" as though he had already conceived more or less affection for the stick of wood.

"Yes, for both of us were getting winded, and say what you will, three against two are big odds," agreed Dick.

"But what under the sun did they do it for?" demanded the other, with a vein of wonder, as well as indignation, in his voice. "We hadn't anything especial to do with their being thrown out tonight—that is, more than the rest of the fellows."

"Oh! I can explain that all right," Dick told him, without any hesitation.

"I wish you would then," urged Leslie, "because it's all Greek to me."



THE PATTTER OF THEIR FLEEING FOOTSTEPS DIED AWAY.
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"If you studied human nature more you wouldn't have any trouble seeing through a millstone that had a hole in it," chuckled Dick. "It's a queer thing, but I've seen it crop up in little chaps not more than three years old."

"As how?" continued the other.

"Ever notice some urchin trip, and fall so as to hurt himself, and how after he scrambles to his feet he kicks viciously at the nearest person? He knows it was all his own fault, and yet seeks to lay the blame on some one else. Well, Nat is built in just that same way, according to my idea."

"H'm, let's see if I get you there, Dick," remarked Leslie, slowly. "You mean that he knows he was kicked out of the meeting by Harry Bartlett and Mr. Holwell, but being afraid to strike back at *them*, he made up his mind to get his revenge by tackling *you*—for I believe they thought you'd be coming along here alone and they could jump on you in a bunch. Is that the idea, Dick?"

"You've got it right, Leslie," admitted the other, promptly. "Nat just hates me because up to now he's never been able to down me, though it hasn't been from lack of trying on his part, you understand."

"Well, he can write down another failure," laughed Leslie, tenderly caressing his left cheek where a stray blow had glanced aside, though leaving a slight abrasion of the skin.

"Thanks to you, mostly," added Dick, slapping his chums on the back heartily.

"My club, you mean," corrected the other hastily. "As a general thing I like to fight fair, but when you're outnumbered, and things look pretty dark, then's the time 'clubs are trumps,' according to my notion."

"If you meet up with any of those fellows tomorrow, take notice and see if they have a pair of black eyes among them," said Dick.

"I'm pretty sure one has!" declared his chum, "for I saw you give him a straight-from-the-shoulder crack square in the face. How he did howl!"

"That must have been my first one, then," agreed Dick. "I think the fellow I got was Dit Hennesy, for I noticed his gait when he rushed us like a mad bull."

"Shall we go on now?" asked his chum.

"Well, we might as well, because they don't mean to come back and try a second round with us. The creek lies in that direction, and unless I miss my guess, by this time they're laving their bruises with cold water, and telling each other how they'd have downed us only for you picking up that paling."

Leslie did not throw the "lucky find" away. Perhaps he meant to take Dick's advice, and keep it in a post of honor in his den at home. Then

when he had boy visitors he could point to it with pride as he narrated the story of the hold-up.

"Want me to cross over lots with you to your house, Dick?" he asked, presently, when they had reached the spot where their trails separated, Dick having to scale a fence and cross a field in order to reach his own home.

"Well, I should say not if I know it," he replied, laughingly. "Things have come to a pretty pass if a fellow can't peep out nights without having an armed guard and retainer at his side. No more danger from that crowd, for tonight anyway, Leslie. See you in the morning."

"Don't get thinking too hard about that farce business, Dick," cautioned the other boy; "or you'll lie awake nights losing sleep. But if you do make up your mind to go in for that prize I'd like to wager you'll land it."

"I wish I could believe that as easy as you do, Leslie," sighed Dick, thinking what a fine thing it would be for him to have twenty-five dollars of his own to spend just as wished, even though most of it must go for the clothes he needed badly.

"And don't forget, Dick, Mr. Holwell was particular to say the prize would be in *gold*. Why, for one, I don't believe I ever saw that much money in gold, outside of a bank. It's worth working for. I only wish I was a better hand at composition, and getting up jokes."

"Why not try, anyhow, Leslie?" urged Dick. "The more there are in the competition the better Mr. Holwell will be pleased. And for all your modesty it might turn out that your farce was the best of the bunch."

"Oh! well, p'raps I may try it, just for fun," agreed the other. "But if it reads as silly as I'm afraid it will, you'll find me putting a match to it in a hurry."

"Let some one else be t'he judge before you do that," suggested Dick. "No fellow knows what he can do till he tries his level best."

"I won't make any promises," was the way Leslie modestly "hedged," for he happened to be one of those boys who shrink from being laughed at.

So the two chums separated, Dick calling out at the last:

"If your face smarts a whole lot, Leslie, bathe it in cold water, and then lay a rag saturated with witch hazel on it when you're in bed. It'll pay to look after it tonight."

"Guess I will," came back from the semi-darkness; and then Dick, whistling a strain or two of a favorite melody, started across the field toward his house, which was not so far away from that of his chum but that they had a home-made telephone connecting the two, over which many an interesting confab was held from time to time.

CHAPTER X

NAT ENTERS THE LIST

THE days passed, and November was half gone.

Two more meetings had been held in the big room of the Y. M. C. A. building, and fully thirty boys' names were on the roll of the new Junior Department. Some of these fellows belonged to poor families, but they were just the ones Mr. Holwell had most in mind when he first conceived the clever idea of starting a Boys' League inside the association.

He had found numerous ways in which to help those whose folks could not really afford to let their boys join. Three fellows were given jobs in connection with the care of the building, for it happened that the association did not have a regular janitor to look after the furnace, and sweep out, as well as keep the windows clean.

Temporary positions were found for two more in the restaurant next door, and it seemed as if Mr. Holwell might prove himself equal to every

emergency that could arise, for he never allowed anything to daunt him.

From the beginning the new movement appeared to meet with success. It was quite noticeable how few boys were to be seen loitering on the streets since the Junior Department had come into existence. The Chief of Police admitted that complaints of practical pranks being played upon citizens of the town, or farmers living nearby, were getting to be a rare occurrence.

Of course, Mr. Holwell was greatly pleased with the measure of success that seemed to have already followed his attempt to better conditions in Cliffwood. He knew, however, that there must be no slackening of the good work, or things would begin to go down hill again; for there was an invisible pulling against the new order of things, which might come from the lower elements of the town.

Every night as many as a score of boys could be seen either reading books or the latest magazines or engaged in playing dominoes, checkers or chess in the comfortable rooms of the Y. M. C. A. building.

Then there was a weekly lecture to which they were usually invited, if the subject happened to be of a nature suitable to their years. The swimming pool had also been completed, and the younger members of the association had the privi-

lege of using this on certain afternoons when one of the older boys could be on hand to keep order. He had also to see that no fellow took any chances of catching cold, to avoid which the shower was always required after coming out of the warmer water.

Down in the gymnasium they had splendid times when allowed to enjoy themselves, and many a boy began to show cheeks of a ruddier hue on account of the work done there under the eye of a competent instructor.

Not only this, but several boys who had until then rejected the friendly advances of Mr. Holwell were influenced to enter their names on the roll, when they learned what glorious times those who already belonged were having. This was just what the big-hearted minister wanted. He felt positive that they would soon change their ways, after getting to know him better.

Indeed, everything seemed to be working along famously. Even Nat and Dit had concluded that they would be silly to deny themselves the splendid privileges afforded by the Y. M. C. A. building when they could be obtained by a simple little written apology.

So one day Mr. Holwell was surprised, and pleased as well, no doubt, to receive a letter by mail, signed by Nat Silmore, Dit Hennesy and Alonzo Crane, in which the trio declared they

were truly sorry they had annoyed the good man on that former occasion. They promised that if he would forgive them, and allow them to send in their names, they would surely obey the rules of the association.

Perhaps even Mr. Holwell may have had serious doubts as to the genuine nature of their reformation. He must have guessed that the main thing with Nat was to be able to enjoy the various pleasant gatherings afforded by the new association. But Mr. Holwell was always ready to give a fellow another chance, and he hastened to seek an interview with each of the three obstreperous signers of the "apology."

It ended in their being admitted to membership in the Boys' Department, much to the chagrin of some of the older members, who among themselves prophesied all sorts of dire disasters as the inevitable result.

"They're just coming in so as to upset things," declared Dan Fenwick to several of his best friends when they found Nat and the other two having the time of their lives on the parallel bars one evening, and grinning openly at each fresh arrival as if to say tauntingly: "Thought you'd keep us out, didn't you? But you've got another guess coming, see!"

Harry Bartlett did not fully share in the hopes of Mr. Holwell regarding the possible "turning

over of a new leaf" on the part of Nat. He knew the youth to be "a tough case," and believed that when he had exhausted the pleasures of the new order of things, they would hear from him again in the shape of some of his notorious tricks.

So the leader of the Y. M. C. A. made up his mind to say nothing, but to keep his eye closely on Nat. And he was firmly resolved that at the first sign of trouble the unruly fellow should be shown the door.

Dick was already busily engaged on his farce. The rules of the game had been laid down plainly by Mr. Holwell at the last weekly meeting.

"Every member in good standing of the Boys' Department is entitled to a chance to win the prize," he had told them. "The farce is to be not only wholly original, even to the jokes, words of songs and choruses, but it must be clean, and entirely unobjectionable. Nothing that could offend your mothers and sisters will be tolerated for a minute. It is intended for at least eight principals to take separate parts, and the copy must be handed in two weeks from today, so we can practice before the Christmas holidays."

When some of the eager boys who meant to try for the rich prize evinced a strong desire for more information, Mr. Holwell continued his remarks.

"The committee will read every farce submit-

ted, and if there are two that seem to be of about equal merit the mayor of Cliffwood has kindly consented to act as umpire so as to decide which is the better. I have also agreed to serve as adviser to the committee; and I want it to be known that no favorites will be played."

"Hurrah!" cried the listening boys, though every one knew full well even before Mr. Holwell said this that the awarding of the golden prize would be done fairly, because he was a square man.

"Every tub will have to stand on its own bottom, you understand," continued the minister, looking down into the faces of the score and more of boys occupying seats in front of him. "And may the best fellow win is the wish of not only myself, but the committee, and every one interested in this work."

To the astonishment, and amusement as well, of some of the boys, Nat Silmore, the night he joined, openly announced his intention of competing for the prize.

"Grin all you want to," he told some of the boys who had gathered near him later in that evening when he and his cronies had become members of the Junior League; "but all the same I've got a hunch you'll laugh on the other side of your mouths when you find out how easy I'm goin' to run away with that yellow stuff."

"But you never were much of a success at school

in composition, you know, Nat," remarked Phil Harkness. "So what makes you think you can beat the rest of us, with one hand tied down?"

Nat winked knowingly as he answered this question.

"Oh! mebbe I've been practicin' on the sly all this time," he told them with a nod of his head. "P'raps I discovered I had a reg'lar gift 'long the line of makin' up jokes and crackin' lively puns. Huh! you just wait and see what happens. I'm just gettin' to find myself, I reckon. Some of these days you'll see folks take off their hats when they speak of Nat Silmore, the celebrated author!"

It was hard to know just what Nat meant when he talked like this. Even Mr. Holwell might have been deceived by his apparent earnestness, indulging in the hope that the bully of Cliffwood had actually begun to see a light, and realized it paid to be decent after all.

As for the boys, they were all at sea, and the subject often came up when two or three of them got together to talk things over.

"It'll pay to keep your eye on Nat," was the sage comment of Dan Fenwick that same evening, when they were getting ready to go home. "He's got something going in that shrewd brain of his, I take it. He'll surprise us by springing a prank, or else by actually copping that prize."

"Wake me up when he does that last," laughed

Leslie. "He'll play second fiddle to a lot of us besides Dick, who have set out to have a fling for the money."

Dick himself did not feel at all uneasy. He was coming along finely with his farce, and already began to entertain high hopes that it would land the prize. As Leslie was himself laboring with considerable vim to compose a similar effort, of course Dick could not read any of his work to his best chum, so he took it out on his folks at home, all of whom declared that it was "just splendid."

As usual the two boys walked home together.

"One good thing I can see about Nat joining the club," ventured Leslie, as they sauntered along leisurely, "is the fact that for the time being it may keep him out of mischief. For instance, here we are taking it easy going home, without any fear of being suddenly pelted with a shower of rocks, or having some trick played on us."

"I hope that Mr. Holwell won't be disappointed," ventured Dick, who was very fond of the minister, as were most of the boys; "because I can see he is beginning to believe Nat's changing his ways. Some of us boys would like to see that same thing, but we'll only believe it when he's proved himself sincere."

"And Dick, I don't believe Nat's forgiven us for the way we upset his little game on the night he waylaid us," continued Leslie. "You remem-

ber both Nat and Dit did have a black eye apiece the next day, though they claimed to have gotten them by running against something in the dark. We knew what it was they struck; and most of the other fellows did too."

"Yes, I saw him looking pretty hard at me more than once," admitted Dick, "and could give a good guess what he was thinking he'd like to do while I was hanging head-down from the trapeze. But both of us will always be careful whenever Nat's in the gymnasium."

"How about our scheme, Dick?" continued Leslie. "You keep on telling me that hardly a day passes without little Billy wandering over into Old Jed Nocker's yard and meeting the deacon. By this time it strikes me the crabbed old man must have begun to get pretty much interested in our Billy."

"Oh! he certainly is," came the prompt reply, "and has even been questioning the little chap about his mother, whom he knows simply as the Widow Smith, and has only glimpsed through the trees as she walked about the Brandon grounds."

"Then you'll be wanting to spring the trap before a great while, I reckon?" pursued Leslie, eagerly.

"Better wait until we're sure he's fallen head over heels into the pit," urged Dick. "The weather has been mighty fine for November.

There was one day though when Billy was kept in because he was a little off his feed, and would you believe it, along about four in the afternoon there came over to the Brandon place the man servant Mr. Nocker has, fetching a polite little note asking the mother to assure him that the dear child was all right, as he had missed him very much."

"Fine, Dick!" exclaimed Leslie. "I'd like to see them together if it could be arranged."

"You shall, and tomorrow at that," replied Dick. "We'll go together and hide in the bushes while little Billy wanders through the hole in the fence."

CHAPTER XI

HOW THE PLAN WORKED

ACCORDING to agreement, Leslie waylaid Dick on the following morning as the latter was hurrying homeward.

"How about that little arrangement of ours, Dick?" he demanded, as he locked arms with his chum and kept pace with the other's long strides.

"Guess it goes through all right," Dick replied, smilingly; "if you mean our plan to lie low, and watch the meeting between Billy and his grandfather."

"It isn't too late for it, I hope," ventured Leslie, anxiously.

"Oh! no," came the confident reply; "I saw Billy's mother this morning, and she promised not to let him out this afternoon till I gave the high sign."

"And what was that to be?" continued the other.

"When we get to the corner of the fence where you can see the windows of the old Brandon house, I'm to wave my handkerchief. She's to be looking, or have Billy do the same, and after I get an an-

swer to my signal we'll just have time to creep up to where the old deacon is waiting to have his daily chat with the child."

"You certainly have it all cooked up as neat as anything, Dick," declared Leslie, admiringly, for he considered that his chum was without a rival when it came down to arranging things.

They hurried on until finally the fence corner was reached from which a good view of the Brandon house could be obtained.

"Now watch me," Dick remarked, as he commenced to wave his pocket handkerchief slowly to and fro.

"There, I can see some one moving at that upper window!" exclaimed Leslie.

"I reckon it must be Billy," said Dick, still keeping up the signalling.

"They see you, Dick, and now some one has commenced to answer. The scheme worked like magic. All we have to do is to go and get into the deacon's grounds."

"I've got that part of it all fixed too," asserted Dick. "Billy isn't to start out for five minutes after they get my signal. By that time we ought to be creeping up pretty close to Mr. Nocker."

"How do you know he'll be waiting there?" whispered Leslie, as both of them started to climb the fence.

"I don't know it, but the chances are ten to one

we'll find him walking up and down as nervous as anything, and keeping his eyes fixed on the path Billy usually comes along."

Once in the Brandon grounds, it was easy enough for them to find the very spot where, on that never-to-be-forgotten Hallowe'en night, the prank-loving crowd had slipped through a gap in the dividing fence.

"You see it's never been mended," whispered Dick exultantly. "Of course, the old deacon knows this break is here, but he wouldn't allow it to be closed for a good deal, because that would stop Billy's daily visits."

Creeping through the opening, they began to make a little detour. The object of this move was plain to Leslie, for he understood that if the stern old man chanced to be watching eagerly for the coming of his new little acquaintance, his eyes would be searching the path leading from the break in the fence.

Dick had all this "laid out to a fraction," as Leslie would have said; and in a short time they could discover a moving figure under the trees.

"Told you so," whispered Dick, under his breath, as he gave his companion a nudge in the ribs, and carefully pointed ahead.

Just as Dick had figured it was old Deacon Nocker who was walking to and fro in his usual nervous fashion. Every now and then he would

stop, shade his eyes with one hand, and gaze long and earnestly beyond.

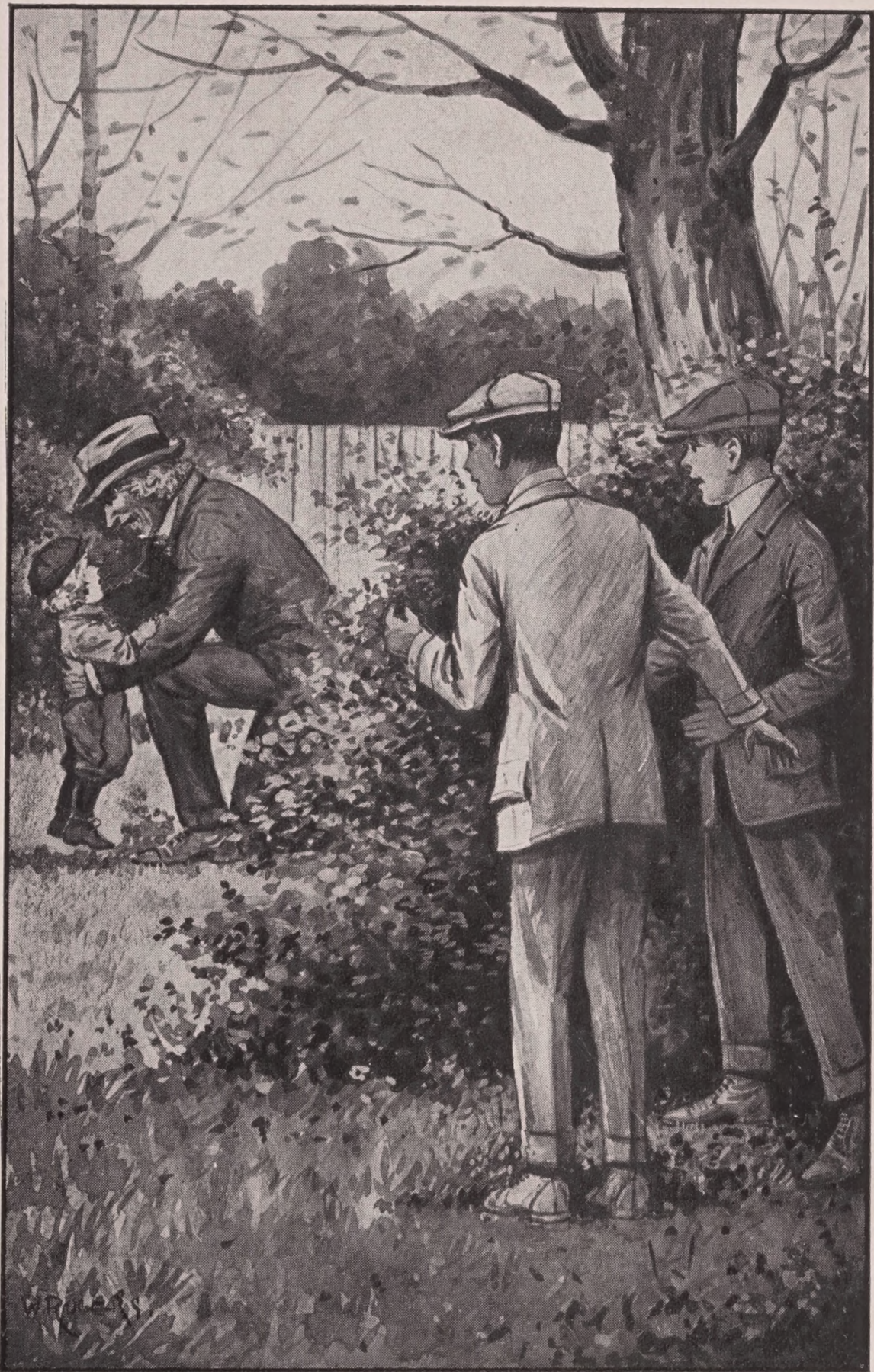
He was evidently wondering whether anything could have happened to the child, for, as a rule, Billy trotted over to visit him long before this time of the afternoon. And really the storekeeper must have left his place of business early in order to enjoy this, to him, novel treat.

Led by Dick, who knew how to creep along after the manner of an Indian, Leslie presently found himself close enough to the impatient deacon to hear him muttering discontentedly to himself. It thrilled them both to catch the disjointed sentences, for by this they knew that already the chubby little Billy had managed to worm himself into a corner of the sour old man's long closed heart.

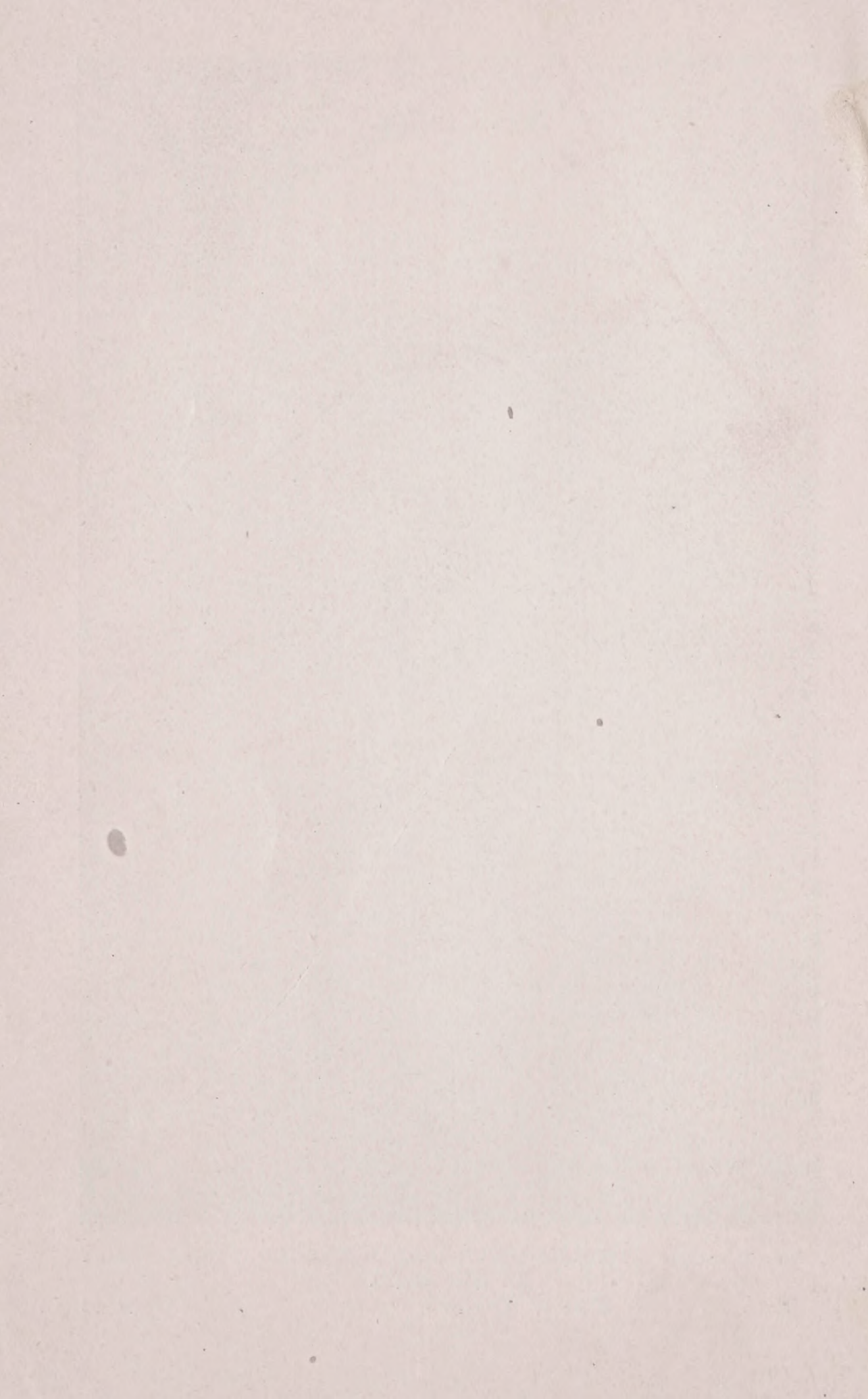
Another nudge from Dick's elbow caused Leslie to catch his breath, for he knew that it meant the child was coming. No danger of Mr. Nocker discovering the pair of eavesdroppers in the bushes close by, for all his attention was taken up with straining his eyes in the opposite quarter.

The boys could see a sturdy little figure brushing through the bushes. Billy was hurrying to keep his appointment, for evidently he had come to rather enjoy meeting the elderly gentleman, who always had some little present for him.

Mr. Nocker was heard to give utterance to an exclamation of exultation as he caught sight of the



THE DEACON STOOPED DOWN AND ENCLOSED LITTLE BILLY
IN HIS ARMS.



lad. He even hurried forward a few paces in order to meet him.

When the two who were in hiding saw the deacon stoop down and actually enclose little Billy in his arms, straining him to his heart, they were thrilled. Nobody in all Cliffwood had ever before known the cold old deacon to exhibit the least bit of tenderness toward any child.

"What kept you so long, Billy boy?" demanded the deacon, reproachfully. "Why, do you know I have been waiting here almost half an hour? I began to think my little playmate had been taken sick again."

"Mamma kept me in," said the little fellow in his clear voice that easily reached the strained ears of the two in the bushes. "But I teased and teased and then when she saw *it* she just said she guessed she'd *have* to let me come out."

The deacon looked at him in a puzzled fashion; but evidently he was so well satisfied to have Billy with him, even for a brief time, that he did not think it worth while to ask questions.

Of course, the two listening boys knew what the child meant, since it was Dick's waving handkerchief that the young widow had seen.

"Mamma told me I could only stay five minutes over here," continued Billy, who seemed to be an unusually bright little fellow, able to express his thoughts in a sensible manner.

"Oh! naughty mamma, to cut your visit short like that," complained the deacon. She must know I enjoy every minute of it so, and she has you the whole of the day and night. But come and sit down with me here while you do stay, Billy."

He uttered the name almost caressingly. Dick was silently chuckling over the astonishing success of the scheme he had originated. He realized that matters had by this time reached a stage that insured success sooner or later.

Mr. Nocker held one of the boy's diminutive hands in his, and led him to a bench which looked very new. Undoubtedly, it had been placed there recently by the special orders of the owner of the place, so that he and the child could sit and chat during the brief visit Billy was allowed to pay him each day.

"Some time, Billy," he was saying, "I must meet your mother. She has been very kind to let you visit a lonely old man like me every day. I am sure she must be a very nice little lady, though I have only seen her at a distance."

Another fierce nudge from Dick's elbow and directed in the region of Leslie's side announced how pleased the other was on hearing this confession.

"My mamma is an angel," they heard Billy stoutly assert. "The nicest mamma in all the world. And I always tell her how good you are

to me. She said some time she hoped to thank you herself, sir."

"And she shall, Billy, she shall," declared the deacon, smiling grimly, and evidently enjoying a new sensation.

Finally the clock in the church tower in town struck the hour. Billy immediately jumped from his seat on the bench.

"Oh! my mamma made me promise to come back when the clock struck, so I must be going."

"I'll walk as far as the fence with you then, Billy," said Mr. Nocker, looking quite forlorn. "Try and get your mother's consent to stay longer tomorrow, please."

"I will, sir," replied the little fellow, promptly; "because I like to be over here with you."

At that the old man bent hastily down and drew Billy into his arms. The watching boys saw him kiss the little chap several times.

"Here is a present for you, Billy," said the deacon, "but don't open the package until you are back with your good mother. Tell her that before long I hope to call on her myself."

Together they walked toward the gap in the division fence. Dick and Leslie changed their position, thinking to make a safe retreat presently. They stopped only long enough to see the stern deacon standing at the fence blowing kisses after little Billy.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN WHO DID NOT KNOW BOYS

"SHAKE hands on it, Dick," said Leslie; "you've got the old curmudgeon to swallow the bait all right, and he's hooked as fast as anything. All you need to do now is to pull the line in and land him."

"Do you think so, Leslie?" mused the other. "Well, I'm glad for the sake of little Billy and his mother, for she has a mighty small amount of money to live on, and the deacon is a rich man, you know."

"What do you reckon he's thinking about while he stands there with his arms on the fence, and his head bowed on them?" asked Leslie, as they were making their way silently toward the street, intending to clamber over the front fence at a point where they could not be seen.

"I don't know for sure," replied the other, "but I should think it might be about his own boy, Amos. Mebbe he looked a little like Billy does now, when he was small. And how can we tell

but what memory has got busy in that scheming old brain of the deacon's?"

"Well," observed Leslie, as they reached the street safely, after vaulting the fence boy-style, "I could see him looking into the face of the youngster now and then, and rubbing his own forehead as if he might be puzzled to know where he ever could have seen Billy before."

"That's right," assented Dick, quickly; "you remember he asked Billy once if he had ever lived in Cliffwood before, and the boy said not that he knew of. Well, it seems to be working finely, and I guess after all little Mrs. Nocker won't have to work to keep the wolf from the door."

"Not with the grip Billy has got on his old grandfather's heart," laughed Leslie. "I never would have believed any child could wind that cold-blooded storekeeper around his little finger. It's as good as pie to me to see it."

They headed into town, talking as they went, and, of course, there were many matters to be discussed between them, besides Dick's latest scheme.

"There's Mr. Holwell," remarked Dick, suddenly; "and since he knows so much about my plan I think I'd like to tell him what we've just been watching."

"A good idea too, Dick," assented the other.

The minister met them with one of his customary pleasant smiles.

"You both look as if something unusually fine had happened this afternoon," he remarked. "Perhaps you wouldn't object to telling me about the same."

"That's just what we meant to do, sir," declared Dick. "It's about Deacon Nocker and little Billy, you see."

Mr. Holwell immediately showed the most intense interest.

"Then that clever plan of yours must be working out in a satisfactory manner, Dick, my lad," he remarked, "if I can judge from the happy expression on your face just now."

"Indeed, I reckon it's going to be a bully success, sir!" ventured Leslie.

"We've just been watching one of their meetings," Dick continued, "and it's plain to be seen, sir, that Billy has got a firm grip on Mr. Nocker's heart. We saw the deacon kiss him lots of times, and squeeze him just as if he wanted to eat him. Oh, it's bound to come out all right in the end."

"Good for you, Dick!" said the minister, enthusiastically, taking the hand of the boy in his strong grip; "and I want to say that I consider you've played one of the neatest games that could be devised."

As the two chums walked onward, Dick's face was beaming with happiness. There had been a time when he would have cared little for the

good opinion of Mr. Holwell, but somehow, of late a great change seemed to have come over the wayward boy's nature. Many things that he had formerly delighted in, no longer held an attraction for him; and every day he was awakening to the fact that service for others could bring more real pleasure than selfish gratification ever did.

"Here's trouble with a big T!" burst out Leslie before they had gone far.

"You mean about Dan Fenwick, I suppose," ventured Dick, glancing at an approaching figure. "Sure enough, he does look pretty sour, as if his dinner hadn't agreed with him any too well."

Dan came along shaking his head, and frowning savagely.

"What's got you this time, Dan?" burst out Leslie as they joined forces. "Lost that new knife you got on your last birthday? Or mebbe now Susie Banks has promised another fellow she'd go with him to that barn dance they're getting up for Christmas Eve?"

At that Dan shook his head and grinned, showing he had not yet reached such a depth of actual woe.

"Huh! 't isn't *quite* so bad as all that, fellows," he went on to explain. "But let me tell you something has got to be done about that Mr. Loft. He's gettin' on my nerves, and that's a fact."

Dick and Leslie exchanged glances at hearing

this fresh complaint about the pedantic librarian who seemed to think boys ought to be fed on heavy stuff from the time they were able to read their primers.

"Been knocking you again, has he, Dan?" demanded Leslie, frowning.

"Why, it's getting so bad now," said the other, angrily, "that a boy can't ask for a single work of fiction but what Mr. Loft takes occasion to give him a long lecture on wasted opportunities. He says we ought to be cramming intelligence into our brains instead of fooling away our time with such trash as we ask for."

"He makes me tired," asserted Leslie. "To his mind everything a boy does that isn't meant to fill his poor brain with knowledge is wasted. If he had his way I bet you there wouldn't be a real boy's book in all the library; and some of them are standard works at that."

"My father and grandfather read Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family Robinson, and a lot of other books that every boy with red blood in his veins dotes on," asserted Dan. "But Mr. Loft told me they ought to be burnt, and that he meant to see if he could influence the town council to allow him to weed out all such pernicious juvenile literature."

"Then never a boy will be seen in our fine library, you can be sure of that!" asserted Dick, pugnaciously.

"I've talked it over with several people besides my folks," Leslie went on to tell his chums, "and they all think this way. Like Mr. Holwell, they admit that there are lots of books for boys published these days at a cheap price that are written just for the excitement in them. They condemn that class, but at the same time say there are many volumes, and some of 'em cheap at that, that while full of adventure, show a boy how to curb his faults, and climb up the ladder of fame."

"I could string off two dozen titles right now, every one a dandy book," asserted Dan, pugnaciously, "all on my shelf at home, and my mother has read every single one of the same. What *she* says is all right you can depend on isn't going to do a fellow any harm, for she used to be a teacher in New York City, and knows boys from the ground up."

"There's only one thing to be done about it," asserted Dick. "That is to start a library of our own as we talked about some time ago."

"You mean inside the Y. M. C. A.?" asked Dan, eagerly.

"Yes, after we consult again with Mr. Holwell about it," came the answer, showing that Dick had been thinking over the idea since the time it was first mentioned.

"Each member of the club might contribute what books he cared to spare," Leslie continued.

"I've got a whole pile I'd like to offer for my share. Mr. Holwell could be the judge of what was fit for us to have in our library. He knows boys ten times better than that high-brow Mr. Loft."

All of them displayed signs of great enthusiasm over the idea. The boys of Cliffwood had long suffered at the hands of the town librarian, who, though doubtless a worthy as well as a learned man, had never learned to peep into the heart of a genuine boy, and know how to handle him so as to cultivate the best there was in him.

"It'll sure be a big feather in our cap if we do manage to have a library of our own, every book carefully selected, and just the kind we love to read as well," Dan hastened to say, the sour look now gone entirely from his face.

"And for my part," Leslie went on to say, "I'm going to get Uncle Henry interested in the scheme. I really believe he'll put up the money to buy a lot of books of the right sort—that are of an uplifting character, besides being full of stirring adventure."

"I'm mighty glad now Mr. Loft lectured me as he did," said Dan; "because you see it's brought matters to a head right away. Whee! but won't he lift his hands in horror when he hears about it. I can just see the look on his face."

CHAPTER XIII

MET ON THE HIGHWAY

UPON reaching home that afternoon Dick found that his mother had an errand she wanted him to do. This was to take his old wheel and ride out a mile or so into the country, to get some fresh eggs that had been promised by the wife of a farmer.

"And be very careful, Dick," she cautioned him as he was ready for the start. "Don't try any fast riding while you are carrying my precious eggs, for once they are scrambled nothing can undo the damage."

The boy laughed merrily at the picture she drew.

"I promise you I'll go carefully enough, Mother," he told her. "Luckily enough I've just fixed the old tire of my wheel so I think it'll hold out. If it breaks loose again why I'll hoof it home rather than take any chances."

"Tell Mrs. Brown to pack the eggs in sawdust as she did the last ones, and the chances of their breaking will be small," were the last words

Mrs. Horner called out after him as he jumped into his saddle and rode away.

Dick was very proud of his little mother, and of late she had been made happy in noticing what a great change had come over her boy. He had always been considerate of her comfort, but at the same time frequently caused her gentle heart to bleed through the tricks he so dearly loved to play. But all that seemed to have undergone a great change since he had joined the Boys' Department of the Y. M. C. A.

Dick managed to reach the Brown farm without a puncture, though he more than half expected one at any moment. The eggs were duly packed in his basket, and the farmer's wife saw to it that the messenger had a slice of gingerbread as well as a glass of cold milk while he sat a few minutes and watched her place the fragile eggs in the sawdust.

"I guess I'll take the other road home," Dick told himself, as he trundled his rather dilapidated wheel out through the gateway on to the road.

It was but an idle fancy, because every road for many miles around Cliffwood was as familiar to Dick as the commons in the center of the town. At the time he could not guess that even this little change of plan was fated to be fraught with consequences that were bound to have a decided influence on his life; yet such proved to be the case.

Hardly had the boy gone three hundred feet from the gate of the Brown farm when he had the expected puncture. The tires on his wheel had been mended so often that they could never be depended on; and Dick found it hard work earning enough money to buy himself a new pair at the sporting goods store in town.

"Just my luck to have it hit the rear wheel," he remarked, as he jumped down, not forgetting to be exceedingly careful how he handled that precious basket of new-laid eggs.

As he could not very well ride on the rim the rest of the way home there was only one thing left to do, which was to trudge along on foot. Dick was rather a philosophical boy, and could accept a bad turn without showing very much chagrin. So whistling some school air he walked sturdily onward.

Less than ten minutes later, while near the outskirts of the town, he came upon a tramp, as he believed, sitting under a tree. At least the man seemed poorly dressed, and his beard was gray, and Dick imagined he looked wan and hungry, as if he might have been recently sick.

The man stopped Dick as he was passing, after nodding cheerfully. Perhaps something in the frank look of the boy's face attracted him.

"This town is Cliffwood, isn't it, lad?" he asked; and somehow the tone of his voice pleased

Dick, and he turned and came back to where the old man was seated.

"Yes, that's Cliffwood," he replied. "Is there any one you want to find in the town?"

The man was staring very hard at him all the while.

"Might I ask your name, boy?" he inquired, not insolently, Dick thought, but as if for some reason he really wanted to know.

"I'm Dick Horner," the boy frankly told him. "I live with my grandfather and my mother on the outskirts of Cliffwood. Grandfather Horner is an army veteran, you see, and everybody around here knows him, I guess."

He wondered why the tramp should start and look at him more keenly than ever, at the same time mumble something to himself.

"Now, I'm of the opinion," the old man went on to say, presently, "that the mother of such a fine lad as you must have a gentle heart."

Dick fell into the trap headlong. If any one ever wished to win his good opinion there was no shorter road to success than through praise of his little mother.

"She's the best mother in the whole country, and that's right!" he declared in his boyish way.

"Do you think, lad, she would give me a bite to eat if I walked along with you?" continued the trampish looking stranger, eagerly.

Dick drew a long breath. It suddenly dawned on him that perhaps the other had been working matters to suit some hidden purpose of his own. Still, Dick stuck to his guns; he had never known his gentle mother to turn a poor tramp away from her door if she really believed him to be hungry, and ready to do some slight service in return for being fed.

"All right!" Dick declared, on the spur of the moment. "You just come along with me, and I guess my mother will be able to give you a sandwich anyhow. I hope you can walk, though at that it's only a little way off."

"I've been pretty sick lately," said the other, shaking his head. "Fact is one time I thought I was going to cash my checks in, and it spurred me to doing something I'd long been figuring on. Thank you, my boy, for your kindness to a total stranger. The bread cast upon the waters may return again before many days."

Now Leslie, being of a more suspicious nature than his chum, Dick, might have suspected that the stranger was simply taking advantage of the boy's good nature to impose on him. Dick, as he walked along, the other hobbling painfully at his side, even offered to relieve the tramp of his shabby little bundle.

"You see, I can lay it on the saddle of my wheel, and alongside the basket of eggs I've been getting

at a farm house," he explained; and the man looked keenly at him, though Dick did not suspect this fact, wagging his beard as though somehow this thoughtful consideration for his age and infirmities touched his heart.

They soon came to the little Horner home. It was a neat cottage close to the bank of the Sweetbriar River. Indeed, when the wind set from upstream one could plainly hear the murmur of the fretful waters at the place where they formed the rough rapids that gave the several mills their waterpower.

Grandpop Horner was sitting in the light of the dying sun, because the day had been quite mild for the late season, and he loved the sunshine very much. As Dick and the trampish looking old fellow came through the gate, Mrs. Horner issued from the doorway of the cottage to urge upon the old veteran the necessity for coming in before the chill of approaching evening affected his rheumatic limb.

Dick saw the look of wonder on both their faces as he led his strange companion up the walk to the front porch.

"Mother," he started to explain, now half afraid that possibly he had done the wrong thing in bringing a total stranger home with him, and at that one who rather looked as though he might be sick and penniless, "this is a poor man I met

on the road. He is hungry, and has been sick. I told him I believed you would not refuse him a bite to eat; and that perhaps he could sleep in the hay in our little barn."

The mother looked a little worried. Then she smiled as though on second thought she could not find it in her heart to refuse to help any one in distress, even though food was never too plentiful at the Horner home.

"Why, certainly, my boy. We can find something to satisfy his appetite; and if you think best he shall pass the night in our barn."

The stranger started to speak as though trying to express his gratitude. Something, however, stopped him; perhaps he choked, for he coughed severely several times, so that Mrs. Horner became visibly anxious.

"You have indeed been sick, my poor man," she hastened to say. "Come directly into the house and get warm. What you need is a cup of hot coffee, and something to eat. Dick, you did the right thing to bring him home with you."

Even Grandfather Horner, who had been shaking his head while this was going on, seemed to be ready to echo the kind words of Dick's mother.

"Only one who has been a soldier for four long years, and endured the pangs of hunger many times, knows what it is to want," he declared earnestly. "When I escaped from Libby Prison I

spent six weeks in the swamps, being hunted like a dog; and I had to live on nuts and roots and berries most of the time, except when some slave managed to give me a sheaf of cornbread. Nobody ever passes the Horner home hungry as long as we have a bit to spare."

The stranger was visibly shaken with emotion. He started toward Mrs. Horner and held out both his trembling hands.

"Polly, don't you know me?" he demanded, at which remark Dick's mother bent forward, stared closely into his seamed face, and then almost shrieked:

"Oh! it's my older brother Silas, whom we believed died years ago in Alaska!"

CHAPTER XIV

LESLIE ON GUARD

LESLIE CAPES, coming around the corner of the house just then, gaped in sheer amazement at the remarkable picture before him. And when he saw Dick's sweet little mother, after giving vent to those words, embrace the shabby looking stranger as though she at least had no doubt concerning his identity, Leslie shook his head in his suspicious way.

"It may be all right," he muttered to himself, "but that old rascal looks like an impostor to me. How can Mrs. Horner tell whether it's her brother or not, when she hasn't seen him for so many years?"

He determined then and there to constitute himself a vigilance committee of one to watch the stranger closely. If he detected anything that looked suspicious it would of course be his duty to tell his chum, and so put the Horners on their guard.

Meanwhile, the others were so excited that none of them even noticed the presence of Leslie Capes,

so that he had plenty of chances to listen and observe.

"For years," the wanderer was saying, with a touch of regret in his voice, "I've been promising myself to look up my only sister if I could strike it rich. Fortune plays queer pranks with men up there in Alaska. Several times I believed I was on the verge of a glorious fortune, only to have the bubble burst."

He uttered the last words with a half groan as though nearly overpowered.

"Never mind, Silas," said Mrs. Horner, as cheerily as she could, "your intentions were good at least. It was not your fault if fortune failed to knock at your door. But how did you find us out?"

The shabby stranger swallowed hard as though nearly overcome with emotion; but the watchful Leslie believed this was mostly assumed. He was more than ever convinced that the so-called Silas would bear close scrutiny.

"When I finally fell sick," continued the weary wanderer, "somehow my thoughts seemed to roam back to the old life more than ever. Finally, I could stand it no longer, and determined to start out in hopes of finding my little sister Polly. I had enough to take me to the States, and East. By following up certain clues, I learned that you were living in this section, and I came here to see you once more before I cashed in."

"But you have been walking far today, Silas, and you look half dead with fatigue," Dick's gentle mother went on to say. "Indeed, you must rest here for a few days until you can plan for your future. Oh! I wish we were better off, so that I could offer you a home for the rest of your life!"

"That would be an imposition, Polly, which I could not hear of," said the other, though Leslie noticed that when he turned his head aside, he smiled as though secretly pleased. "If I can rest a day or two, I intend to go on to New York City, where an old partner of mine lives."

"But would he do anything for you, Silas?" asked Mrs. Horner, solicitously.

"I saved his life once in the gold mines up there in the frozen North," explained Silas, quickly. "And as he has made his pile, I fancy Joe Shepard wouldn't begrudge me the little money needed to keep my soul and body together for the short time I have to live."

Now Leslie had been noticing that in spite of the cough which Silas gave vent to at times, and his bent attitude, he had rather a sturdy figure.

"Sure that old fellow is putting it on pretty thick for some reason or other," the boy kept telling himself. "I even believe that cough of his is made up, because he lets it go every once in a while, as if he suddenly remembers a plan he has figured out.

Huh! he may pull the wool over the eyes of these simple Horners, but I've got my eye on him, you bet. I'll lay low and watch the sly old fox."

Grandpop Horner again entered into the conversation at this point. He pounded his cane vigorously on the floor to emphasize his remarks, in a way he had.

"Don't think of it, my boy," he said, heartily. "No brother of my daughter-in-law, Polly Horner, is going to beg his way while we've got a crust in the larder. You'll hang your hat on a peg in this house, and be welcome to what little we've got."

"Oh! that's too much, sir, entirely too much," remonstrated the other, shaken by some emotion. "But I am tempted to stay with you a day or two until I get a little strength back. Then I can shape my plans, and will perhaps have heard from my old partner in the city. He may send me the money to come to him."

"Polly, put the kettle on!" sang Grandpop Horner, in his cheery way, "and we will have our tea. The fare is plain, Silas, but so far we have not known real want, though there are many things we have to do without, and my pension doesn't go as far as I would like."

The newcomer sat there looking quite happy, Leslie Capes thought as he watched his chum Dick bustling around, bringing in several armfuls of wood, and assisting his mother in various ways.

Now ordinarily, Leslie, being a most accommodating fellow, would have hastened to lend Dick a helping hand. On this special occasion he did nothing of the sort, and for a very good reason.

"I've just *got* to play detective," he told himself in explanation for his peculiar conduct, "and keep an eye on that smart stranger. I don't believe more than half he says. He knows something about Silas Langhorne, who was mebbe a pal of his up in Alaska, and is bent on imposing on these simple people. But p'raps he'll run up against a snag when he finds he's got Leslie Capes to contend with."

Old Grandpop Horner entertained the wanderer while these preparations for supper were under way. Of course, most of his talk ran along the lines of his extraordinary adventures in the long-ago, when he fought through the Civil War. Indeed, no matter what line the conversation opened with, it was sure to drift to those times that had been stamped so indelibly on the old veteran's mind.

Dick presently found that his mother needed him no longer and so joined his chum, who was playing with little Sue, some seven years of age, a winsome girl with chestnut curls, and a slight lisp that made her more attractive than otherwise might have been the case.

Even Grandpop had his duties to perform, and

was set to work grinding the coffee, a favorite task he delighted in. Silas had arisen from his chair, and was wandering about the cozy room looking at the pictures on the walls, some of them family portraits.

"Well, I haven't had much time to say how-d'ye-do, Leslie," remarked Dick, as he dropped down beside the other. "You see with this queer thing happening it's excited us a heap. Did you run over to tell me anything special?"

"Oh!" explained the other, "I was just passing and thought I'd ask you for that list of books you promised to give me, some that you won in that puzzle contest a year ago. I'm getting things together, you know, so Mr. Holwell can start looking the books over, and deciding which ones he thinks suitable for our new library."

"I'm glad you came when you did," chuckled Dick; "because it was just in time to see the reunion. I guess this is about the queerest thing that ever happened to us."

"How did you happen to meet—er, your Uncle Silas?" queried Leslie.

"Oh! he was sitting by the side of the road resting when I came by," the other went on to say. "My shabby old wheel had broken down, and I was trundling it along. Only for that I might have whirled past and never noticed him."

"Did he stop you and ask who you were?" pur-

sued Leslie, curiously, for the newcomer was just then at the other side of the room talking with little Susie.

"Well, we somehow seemed to be attracted toward each other," explained Dick. "I felt sorry for a man who looked so poor and needy, and when we got to talking he did ask me my name I believe."

"Huh!" grunted Leslie, "chances are you invited him to walk along with you and get something to eat at your folks' house. I say that because it'd be just like you. The poorer the Horners are the more they want to do things for those they think worse off than themselves."

Dick did not take any offense at what his chum said. Indeed, he even laughed a little as though he believed it to be a compliment.

"It must be in the blood then," he told Leslie, "because none of us can help it. My mother is always hoping that some day she may fall into a sum of money, because then she could help so many other poor people. What, not going already, Leslie?"

"I must," replied the other who had arisen. Give me the list of books you have, Dick. You might step outside with me," he added in a whisper, "because I'd like to say a few words in your ear that I don't dare get off here."

Dick knew his chum so well that he thought

nothing of this rather strange request. He went into his own small den and quickly came back bearing a slip of paper.

"There you are," he told the other, "and I don't believe Mr. Holwell can put a black cross against any one on the list, because they're all splendid, thrilling, uplifting stories, and bound to do any fellow heaps of good reading them."

He led the way to the outer air. The night was coming on though it was not fully dark. There was a suspicion of colder weather in the air, although as yet no one could call it chilly.

"Now what do you want to say to me that you didn't care to tell indoors, Leslie?"

"Only this, Dick," replied the other; "don't believe *all* that old chap says. He may be what he claims, but I've got my doubts about it."

"Then you must have a good reason for thinking that way?" urged Dick, hardly pleased at hearing his chum speak in this strain.

"I'm going on general principles to begin with," continued Leslie, unabashed, "for while I'm not from Missouri I have to be shown before I believe. Besides, according to my humble opinion, the story he tells is decidedly fishy."

"Oh! do you think so?" asked Dick, chuckling, for it usually amused him to find his friend acting in this way. In times past he had even dubbed Leslie the Great Objector. "All of us

seem to believe what he says, and mother surely ought to recognize her own long-lost brother."

"It would seem so," admitted Leslie, slowly. "But to tell you the truth, I don't altogether like his ways. He strikes me as a chap who is playing some sort of clever game."

"That's a pretty serious accusation to make, old fellow," argued Dick. "Now, if the Horners were well-to-do, there might be some reason for a scamp to scheme to hoodwink us. But great governor! what could any one expect to get here?"

"I don't know," admitted Leslie, who, however, was very tenacious in his ways, and could not be easily induced to desert his guns. "But something tells me he is up to some dark scheme."

"Oh!" laughed Dick, "perhaps now he's learned in a mysterious way that the Horners have fallen heir to some great big fortune, though they don't know it yet themselves. And as you say, he may be intending to hang around so as to steal valuable papers that will enable him to claim the same. That must be what you've got in mind, Leslie—a regular movies stunt."

"Now you're making fun of me, Dick," complained the other. "But I sat there and pretended to play with Susie, while I kept one eye on your so-called Uncle Silas. And Dick, I could see him chuckling to himself every little while as if something tickled him immensely."

"Well, what of that?" urged Dick, stoutly. "He's had hard luck all his life, and I can understand how pleased he must be to come on folks who belong to him. A rover they say, when he gets real old and sickly, always thinks of the past. Now, for my part, I seem to take to Uncle Silas quite well. We may find a way to keep him with us right along."

"Listen," said Leslie, as he was about to hurry off, "I saw him take up one of the tea spoons and look at it. Then he nodded his head as if he had found it real silver you know, one of those few heirlooms your poor mother thinks so much of."

"Well," said Dick, humorously, "if anybody ever ran across anything worth taking in the Horner home, I'd make him divide with me. So-long, Leslie, and thank you for the warning. But we Horners are always willing to take a chance, you know."

CHAPTER XV

COUNTER CURRENTS IN THE "GYM"

How are you coming on with your farce, Dick?" asked Mr. Holwell, the next evening, as he stepped in at the Y. M. C. A. building to see how the boys were coming on, and also to fulfill several errands.

"Oh! I seem to be forging right ahead, sir," laughed Dick, "though I find it a pretty hard proposition to get up the songs and choruses. I don't believe I could have tackled the job only for your permission to get such assistance in the song part that we could from any of our young companions."

"Yes, you told me before that one of the girls had been helping you there," remarked the minister, who was showing a very deep interest in all of the boys belonging to the new department of the association. "I have given the same permission to all who intend to compete. But it is expressly understood that the words of the songs and choruses, as well as everything save the musical score, must be entirely original with the ones

who submit their farces to the committee, or else they will be thrown out."

"Sometimes I am almost tempted to tear mine up," admitted Dick, frankly; "because it reads silly to me; but my folks at home seem to like it, and my chum Leslie says it is fine. But then, I guess he only tells me that because he is my chum."

"Don't think of tearing it up, my boy," urged the minister, earnestly. "Many a famous man has had his hours of doubt, and come near abandoning the career he had marked out for himself. You are no judge of your own productions. Older heads must decide on the merits of the compositions. Promise me that no matter what you think you will finish the farce and hand it in."

"Oh! I can promise you that, sir," replied Dick, flushing with pleasure, since he felt that Mr. Howell had a certain amount of confidence in him.

Shortly afterward the minister left the building, having accomplished what errands he had in view when entering. It was the one evening in the week when the juniors were allowed the freedom of the gymnasium, and a dozen fellows had already donned their "gym" garments, so that they could have perfect freedom of movement when exercising in their favorite ways.

Nat and Dit were on hand, for they never missed an opportunity to be present on "gym" night. Indeed, Dick strongly suspected it was this

very thing that had tempted Nat and his cronies to swallow their pride, and send that apology to Mr. Holwell.

Being quite an athlete, Nat always took a leading part in the varied exercises of the gymnasium. He could do many feats that caused some of the other less muscular and agile boys to envy him very much.

Mr. Holwell, who read boys so well, understood that it was only a slender hold the association had on such a wild fellow as Nat. He hoped, however, that by degrees the influences of the new life might serve to tone the other down, and cause him to change his ways.

After some of the boys had tired themselves out in their exercises with the parallel bars, the swinging hoops, the lifting weights, and many other devices calculated to make them stronger in every way, they clustered around Nat, who was holding forth on the subject of his farce.

"Wait till you hear it," he was telling them in his exultant and superior way. "Chances are you'll double up like a hinge with every page that's read. Am I right, Dit?" and as he said this last he turned on his "shadow," Dit Hennesy, who, as always, was hovering close by Nat.

"Say, it's sure a screamer," asserted the other, vigorously. "Talk to me about funny business, Nat's got every minstrel show beat to a frazzle.

He read some of the stuff to me last night, and I'm giving you the straight thing when I tell you my mother says she heard me laughing in my sleep ever so many times."

Nat grinned happily as he looked around. Then his eye fell on Dick, who he very well knew was also writing a farce so as to enter the competition for the golden prize.

"I reckon that makes you feel some sore, eh, Dick?" he sneered, as though delighted at the opportunity to pay back some of the long score he thought he owed the other. "Course you're doing your level best; but shucks! you're only wasting your time let me tell you. There never was, and there never will be as funny a farce as I'm goin' to spring on the committee. Huh! even makes me laugh myself when I get off a rattlin' good joke, and hurry to write it down before I forget it."

To tell the truth, Dick did feel as though he hardly had the ghost of a chance in the competition, after hearing all this boasting. Not for worlds, however, would he let that fellow see him look downcast. So he laughed good-naturedly as he went on to say in reply:

"Oh! well, I'm doing my level best, and that's all any fellow can do. If the committee turns down my effort, all right. I'll take my medicine without whimpering. I believe the best original farce ought to win, and that's all there is to it."

Nat looked keenly at him as though he wondered whether Dick could have any hidden meaning back of his words.

"Well, you see," he continued, "I'm one of the kind of fellows always on the lookout for a chance to get off a crackin' good joke on people. That helps me a heap in doin' my writin'. Right now I've been thinking up a little scheme to give old Limpy Peters, the shoemaker, the scare of his life."

"How's that, Nat?" asked Dit Hennesy, as he invariably did when the other showed signs of having conjured up some scheme that promised to give them the selfish enjoyment felt by the boy who was stoning the frogs.

"I'll tell you," chuckled Nat, who seemed to be feeling particularly jolly on this occasion. "You know Limpy Peters lost his wife some years ago. He always goes to the graveyard on nights when there's a full moon, and sits there a long time like a silly old fool. Well, I'm thinking what fun it'd be to hide near that place and start to groaning when he comes. Say, just try to picture that cripple makin' tracks for the gate, will you? It'd be enough to make a mummy grin to see him tumblin' all over himself."

Dit, of course, laughed as though he thought it a good idea. Several other boys being thoughtless, also chuckled, as they mentally pictured the poor

cobbler stumbling and falling in his fright and mad desire to escape.

Others, however, frowned on the foolish scheme, and could be heard muttering the word "shame." Nat stiffened up, and his cheeks flamed with anger. He looked at Dick, as though believing that he had been loudest in his condemnation.

"Seems you don't like my little joke any too well, hey, Dick Horner?" he demanded, with a scowl. "Well, mebbe you can originate a better one yourself."

"I don't understand what it's got to do with getting up a farce, and I'd like you to explain that part to me," Dick told him, calmly.

"Oh!" exclaimed the other, with a scornful laugh, "that shows that you don't appreciate the glorious possibilities a situation like that offers a real author of farces. I'm deep in it right now, and the conversation that is carried on between the poor scared chap in the graveyard and the supposed ghost would make you split your sides laughing, just to hear it."

"Why," spoke up the dutiful Dit, "I wanted him to read it to me, but he just wouldn't. He said it'd make me so weak with laughin' I never could walk home. Say, if it's any better than what I did hear it sure must be a corker."

"But why frighten poor Limpy Peters when you're getting on so well as it is?" demanded Dick.

"Huh! shows your ignorance when you say that," snorted Nat. "When a dramatist gets up a show he always wants to try it on the dog first, before it's played in a big city. So I want to get what they call *inspiration* by seeing just how scared Limpy Peters will be when I groan, and carry on."

"Shame on you, Nat!" said Leslie Capes, indignantly.

"Yes, and a whole lot of us echo that sentiment," Dick went on to say. "Poor old Limpy Peters has suffered terribly in his life. Nearly every boy in Cliffwood thinks a heap of the old man, and for one I won't stand by and hear of his being pestered, as you say, just to give you 'inspiration.' "

"Huh! you talk pretty big, Dick Horner," snapped Nat, with one of his lofty looks. "What'd you do about it if I said I'd carry on as I pleased?"

Dick faced him with flashing eyes. Somehow he was fully aroused by now, and meant to give the other a piece of his mind.

"I'll tell you what I'll do for one thing!" he exclaimed, "and unless I miss my guess, there are a lot of other fellows here who feel the same way. I'll tell Mr. Holwell about your scheme, and he'll see to it that old Peters is warned. Then if you try what you threaten you may get in a peck of trouble."

"That's my way of thinking, too!" asserted Leslie, instantly ranging alongside of his chum. "We listened to you on Hallowe'en, and came near getting arrested for entering Mr. Nocker's house to give him a scare."

"Better forget about this idea, Nat," warned Peg Fosdick. "For one I'd never stand to hear of poor old Peters being scared half to death. I know what it is to limp myself, and can feel for the lame cobbler."

"Count me in as being opposed to that sort of cruel joke!" declared Andy Hale.

"Ditto here!" sang out Clint Babbett. "Time's gone by when I could get any real fun out of giving pain to other people."

"Plenty of other ways to find amusement, so far as I'm concerned, and so put me down as being with you, Dick, if you feel that you've got to give Nat away to Mr. Holwell," observed Elmer Jones, positively.

Nat glared around him. To tell the truth every one seemed against him save his crony Dit Hennesy.

"Oh! well," he laughed harshly; "seein' that you're so timid a bunch, I'll call the joke off. Reckon I can finish my little imaginary conversation between the ghost and the cobbler without tryin' it on the dog. And you needn't say a word to Mr. Holwell about it, Dick; unless you're itchin'

to get me put out of the game so you could have a walk-over."

Dick felt the sneer, and turned red, but held his ground.

"I'll promise not to say a word to Mr. Howell," he told Nat. "But I mean to let Limpy know some boys are thinking of playing a practical joke on him one of these nights, so he can carry a pistol along with him when he goes to sit by the grave of his wife. That's all I've got to say about it."

"Oh! forget it," sneered Nat. "I don't take any chances with a shooting-iron. Limpy needn't bother, for I won't molest him."

The look he gave Dick as he turned away was an ugly one.

"Better watch out more than ever for Nat, Dick," cautioned Leslie, as the two of them walked home together that evening. "He's got it in for you as sure as anything."

"Oh! I'm not bothering my head about his ever laying a hand on me," declared the other boy, indifferently. "I only wish I could be as sure that his farce wouldn't make my effort look silly. From what they say, Nat must be a rattling good hand at writing that sort of thing. Of course, I'll keep on trying my best, but I'm afraid there isn't much chance of my winning those twenty-five gold dollars."

CHAPTER XVI

THE NIGHT ALARM

IT was a hard thing for Leslie to keep away from the Horner home these days. He had much in common with Dick to talk over, what with the progress of the black-face farce; the wonderful scheme Dick was carrying out looking to the bringing together of old Deacon Nocker and his son's little family; and now, last of all, the mystery hanging over the returned Silas Langhorne.

Leslie was particularly interested in the weary wanderer who had spent the better part of his life in the endeavor to coax fortune to pour her favors into his lap, only to meet with final defeat.

"Even if he is Dick's real uncle, which I doubt a whole lot," he often told himself, "think of the nerve of him coming here to hang on to those poor people like a barnacle does to a ship's keel. Why, with another mouth to feed, they'll go hungry more'n a few times, if the winter's as hard as they say it's going to be. I tell you it doesn't look right to me; and I've just *got* to expose that old fraud."

So Leslie, in pursuance of his determination, was

over with Dick on the night that followed the encounter at the gymnasium.

Dick was induced to read a little more of his farce while the two of them sat in his den, and Leslie again laughed heartily over the humorous way the writer expressed himself, as well as at the jokes he worked in between the jolly songs and choruses.

"Don't you dare get cold feet about this thing, Dick," he told his chum sternly, when the other absolutely refused to read any more that night, as supper was nearly ready, and Leslie had agreed to eat with them. "I tell you it's a peach, and Nat, for all his boasting, isn't going to have a show-in."

Of course, Dick liked to hear that sort of thing, for he really needed all sorts of encouragement to bolster up his drooping spirits. That golden prize hung temptingly before his eyes, but he feared he was doomed never to clutch it; although already he had figured out how many things besides a suit of new clothes it would afford him that winter.

The boys went in to supper when the summons came. Silas was still in evidence. He looked considerably better, now that he had washed up, and brushed the dust from his shabby clothes, which were pretty nearly all his possessions, for he had only been carrying a little bundle done up in a gunny-sack when Dick first met him.

"I ought to be goin' on my way by this time," Silas was remarking, as they sat at the table and

partook of the humble fare, which, however, was plentiful enough for that occasion; "though I must say I'm terribly disappointed at not hearin' from my old side partner, Joe Shepard, down in New York City, in answer to the letter I sent him."

Mrs. Horner shook her head at hearing that.

"Stay a little longer with us, Silas," she urged; "until you are stronger at any rate. You don't eat much, and I'm sure, as my only brother, you are welcome to share in what we have. We put our trust in Providence, and so far we have never been forgotten. Something will turn up to help us, sooner or later."

This showed Leslie Capes what a splendid little woman Dick's mother was, and deep down in his heart he knew she was right; but all the same he could not get over his firm distrust of the wanderer.

"As sure as anything," he told himself as he continued to eat, "that was something mighty like a grin I saw workin' on the old fraud's face when she said that. It's a shame, that's what it is, the way he's imposing on Dick's folks. I'm just bound to find him out, so as to expose him for the impostor he is."

He meant to warn his chum again, though he felt pretty confident the other would only laugh at him, Dick was so frank and unsuspicious himself by nature.

"If I should happen to get real sick, Polly," he heard the wanderer saying, "I want you to open my bundle, and you'll find just a little mite of money I've hung on to, enough I hope to put me under the ground decently. I'd feel pretty badly if I thought I'd come all the way from Alaska just to make you additional expense in burying me."

"Don't speak of it, Silas," said Mrs. Horner, shaking her head. "You're going to rest a bit now, and perhaps when you get stronger, there may open up some way for you to earn a little money. We haven't reached the end of our scanty resources yet, I hope."

"And my quarterly pension money will be coming along about the first of the year, when we can pay all we owe, and have a bit left over," said Grandpop Horner, proudly. "Ah! I reckon I earned all Uncle Sam pays me now in my old age, when you remember the terrible sufferings we endured. Many a time I lay on the cold ground in a storm so that my hair was frozen to the soil, and a comrade had to actually chop me loose with a hatchet in the morning."

The garrulous old veteran was so full of reminiscences, and could be started off so easily, that Dick and his mother always had to be ready to turn the conversation into another channel, once he began to "remember."

No doubt grandpop found an attentive listener

in the returned wanderer, for they had spent many hours smoking together while the housewife carried on her numerous duties.

Leslie had really come over on this occasion to find out when Dick considered the time ripe for springing the great surprise on Deacon Nocker. He was beginning to feel impatient about it, and told Dick as much later on that evening as they sat in the latter's little room.

"Never fear," Dick assured him, "but what it's going to be brought to a climax soon now. I think we've got the old gentleman so wrapped up in little Billy that he would accept a dozen relatives rather than have the youngster pass out of his life forever. The deacon is a changed man these days, lots of people have said; and we know what the reason for it is."

"Are you meaning to let him meet his daughter-in-law as Mrs. Smith," continued Leslie, "and get interested in her too, before he learns the staggering truth that Billy really belongs to him?"

"Mr. Holwell thinks that would be the best plan," replied Dick. "He says if the deacon tries to meet the child's mother soon, not to interfere."

"Huh! the easiest way to bring that about," said Leslie, eagerly, "would be just to have Billy stay at home a couple of days. Then you bet Mr. Nocker'll hurry over and ask to see the child's mother, so as to inquire about Billy."

"Just what Mr. Holwell suggested," remarked Dick. "I'll speak to her about it tomorrow. We can fix it so when the surprise is sprung perhaps a few of us who are most interested may be on hand to see how the old man acts when he learns the truth."

"Good for you, Dick!" cried Leslie. "I'd give a heap to be there when he hears that Billy is his sure-enough grandson. And I give you my word he'll never dream of doing anything but taking Tilly, his boy Amos' widow, to his heart to keep forever. Whee! but this is a glorious scheme you've been playing, a thousand times better all around than any one of Nat's grand games, that are always cruel."

"I've certainly had more real enjoyment out of it so far than Nat could have found in all his pranks bunched together," asserted Dick. "Besides, it's going to do several people good; and my mother has backed me up in it, which pleases me a whole lot in the bargain."

"Listen! that's the wind commencing to blow, and from the north, too, Dick. I had a hunch it'd come up strong about ten tonight, and give us some real winter weather again. How it moans around the corner of the house. They say that's always a sure sign of cold weather."

"Let it blow," laughed Dick, "so far as I'm concerned. We've got a tight roof overhead, and

plenty of coal in the cellar, for a time at least. If the cold gives us a thick coat of ice on the pond for skating, so much the better. But as you say it does begin to howl like sixty around that north end of the house."

"Whee! I should think your Uncle Silas"—how Leslie did enjoy putting emphasis on that word "Uncle" whenever he spoke it—"would shake hands with himself over the change in his fortunes since he struck the Horner cottage. If he had to camp out on a night like this he'd shake half to pieces."

"Oh! I'm glad he doesn't have to," remarked Dick, firmly. "He's told us a good many thrilling things that have happened to him in all these years of his wanderings; and I guess the poor old chap feels like a ship that's reached the end of its last voyage."

Leslie laughed softly at hearing Dick say this.

"I don't know about that, Dick," he ventured to remark. "According to my notion, he's got considerable of a hold on life yet. Mebbe now that things have turned so pleasant for him he may linger a long time. They nearly always do, my father says, with no worries on their minds."

"Hark! wasn't that the fire bell?" suddenly demanded Dick, jumping up.

"It sure enough is!" echoed the other boy, as the clanging sounds came more plainly than be-

fore; "and what a terribly hard night for a blaze, too. Where's my hat and coat, Dick? I never could keep from running to a fire."

"I'm with you there, old fellow!" said Dick, as he hastily donned his outer garment, after which both lads hastened from the house.

"Look there!" exclaimed Leslie, almost immediately. "A bright light is leaping up; and Dick, honest to goodness, it's coming from that direction too. I'm afraid it must be either Deacon Nocker's house, or the Brandon place next door!"

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE FIRE

"THE Brandon place!" echoed Dick, catching his breath as a sudden chill passed over him. "What if it should be, and little Billy there!"

Somehow neither of them seemed to give one thought to the old deacon. Indeed, possibly in all Cliffwood there could hardly have been found a single boy who would have cared a snap of his finger if Jed Nocker's fine house went up in flame and smoke.

"Let's get away!" suggested Leslie, hastily.

"I'm with you!" Dick snapped out, and with that both started at headlong speed, making in the direction of that bright and ever increasing light.

One good thing was that they would not have very far to run, for the Brandon place, as well as that of the deacon adjoining, was only a short distance from the modest home of the Horners.

Hardly had they started when they became aware of the fact that others besides themselves were heading toward the scene of the conflagration. Swiftly moving figures could be discovered

in the half darkness, and all converging toward the same spot.

Sounds, too, began to be heard. Whenever that metallic clang started in Cliffwood, as the hammer was beaten on the suspended steel rim of a railway locomotive driving wheel, it aroused the most intense excitement.

People could be heard shouting across back fences, asking one another where the fire could be. Doubtless, the one thought in the minds of all was that with that rising north wind it would prove to be a bad night for a conflagration.

The alarm still continued to sound. Men came dashing out of houses wearing their enameled fire hats, and perhaps hastily drawing on their leather coats. The fire-fighting department of Cliffwood, like most towns of its size, was a volunteer one, the members serving as a duty they owed to the community.

"Faster, Dick!" gasped Leslie, as the two boys hastened along. "She's bulging up like everything, don't you see? And it's sure enough that place!"

Dick knew that already, for he had the lay of the land well fixed in his mind. It meant that Billy, yes, and Billy's little mother as well, might be in dire danger, for the cruel flames would be no respecter of persons.

So the boys ran at even a faster gait than before,

if such a thing were possible. When, presently, they arrived at the gate of the Brandon place, it was to find that others were ahead of them. Quite a group of people could be seen in the grounds, staring at the spectacle presented by the burning house, exchanging all manner of comments, but really doing nothing to save life or property, from lack of a leader.

The first thing Dick did was to cast his eyes hastily around. He was, of course, looking for some sign of the handsome little chap and his mother, Tilly. When that sweeping look failed to find either of those in whose welfare he was so deeply interested, Dick again felt a coldness in the region of his heart.

A great shouting down the road announced that the fire laddies were coming on the run with the machine. They would be on hand in a few minutes, Dick realized, but at the same time it was evident that even seconds were precious, and might cost those in peril their lives.

Leslie gripped his arm just then.

"See there, isn't that she, Dick?" he cried, huskily, for he was laboring under great excitement, and it was really a wonder he could speak at all.

"I don't see her," Dick replied, anxiously, as he scrutinized the little group at which his chum was pointing his finger.

"Oh! I didn't mean Billy's mother," Leslie has-

tened to explain. "I meant the woman she has stopping with her to help with the work."

Dick saw now, and was off like a flash, leaving his chum to follow at his heels. If any one would know about Billy and his mother, surely Mrs. Kelly should. She was trying to answer the numerous questions being showered upon her by those around; but since virtually no one knew that there had been a tenant in the Brandon house they could not realize the extreme gravity of the situation.

Dick pushed his way into the group. He seized hold of the excited woman's arm, and there was something so like authority in the boy's action that Mrs. Kelly stopped crying and turned toward him.

"Where are Billy and his mother?" demanded the boy.

The woman turned and pointed at the burning house, one end of which was by this time a mass of flames.

"In there, I'm half afraid," she half screamed. "Oh! the pore little chappie and his swate mother will be kilt entirely I do be afraid!"

"What's that?" demanded a hoarse voice just then, and half turning his head, Leslie saw the deacon standing there, his face white, and drawn as with a spasm of pain.

Possibly Dick knew the old man was at his elbow but he had no time just then to bother with him. With little Billy in deadly peril, the affairs of Dea-

con Nocker played a very small part in the boy's mind.

Something must be done, and that without loss of time. Undoubtedly, the widow must be asleep in the burning mansion, quite unaware of the danger surrounding her; and of course Billy shared her peril.

Dick whirled on his chum. Well did he know that Leslie would stand back of him in the rash undertaking that he was now bent on accepting; for he had seen this comrade tested on many a previous occasion, and in every instance Leslie had proven as true as steel.

"We must make the try, if you're ready to go in with me!" he cried, pointing to where the front door of the building stood invitingly open, the work-woman having evidently escaped by that means when she found the house afire.

"You bet I'm going to make the try!" Leslie assured him.

"Wait till the firemen get here, boys!" urged one woman, who possibly had boys of her own at home, and shuddered at the thought of their dashing into the doomed house, even though it were to save human life.

"It might be too late then," snapped Dick. "Come on, Leslie. Wet your handkerchief in this bucket, and cover your nose with it as much as you can, for the smoke will be something terrible."

That was a most sensible suggestion which Dick made. Even if they did not come into contact with the leaping flames, the smoke was thick enough to smother them.

Several of the men who had stood around doing nothing, upon seeing what the two daring boys meant to attempt, called out to them. Some applauded their schemes, while others told them they were foolish, because the chances were they would not only fail to accomplish anything but lose their own lives in the bargain.

"Let them alone, can't you?" shouted the shrill voice of Deacon Nocker. "They are ten times braver than any one of you cowards; and they will save Billy yet, I know they will—they *must*, I tell you! Go on, boys, and God bless you!"

Neither Dick nor Leslie would soon forget that moment while they dabbled their handkerchiefs in the cold water contained in the pail, and then dashed headlong through the open door of the old Brandon house.

"Keep in touch with me!" Dick had called out over his shoulder; for the flames and the shouting people made such a racket by this time that one had to raise his voice in order to be heard.

Then they vanished from the gaze of the horrified group; and doubtless many of the onlookers firmly believed they would never again set eyes on the venturesome lads.

It was fortunate that Dick knew all about the interior of that house, thanks to his frequent visits. Had it been otherwise, he might have floundered around, and led his chum into a trap from which escape would have been difficult, if not impossible.

The smoke was very dense, so that seeing was a hard task. Through the billows of black vapor they could, however, catch glimpses of the darting flames that looked like red tongues licking up the woodwork of the doomed building.

Dick had no particular plan arranged, for the whole thing had come upon them so suddenly that there had been little time to do any thinking. He meant to get to where he expected to find the widow and her boy, perhaps unconscious in the smoke; and then rescue them in some manner, it might be by means of the windows.

Groping his way along the hall, Dick found himself at the foot of the stairs up which he and his companion must make their way, for the sleeping rooms were all on the second story.

The fire was dreadfully close. They could feel its burning heat upon their faces, and despite the ready handkerchiefs, the pungent smoke almost choked them. Nevertheless, Dick did not hesitate for even a fraction of a minute. Up those stairs they must rush, no matter if the fire had already seized upon the railing in places.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DARING RESCUE

JUST how they made their way up those stairs Leslie never could tell. The first thing he knew he found himself on the upper landing, and facing a sheet of flames that made the whirling smoke wreaths look strangely like some kind of demon stretching out a myriad hands toward him.

Dick was for pushing on, even though to do so he had to advance in the direction where the fire was most furious. He kept fingering the wall as he went, because with one hand holding the tied handkerchief partly over his eyes he could not depend on his sight to tell him when he reached the door of the room in which he knew the widow had taken up her quarters with her little son.

Fortunately, it was not at the extreme rear of the house, where the fire seemed to be in absolute control. Dick remembered feeling very thankful on this account as he continued to grope his way along.

Whenever the flames died down for a second or two, the utmost darkness reigned in that upper

hall. Then, suddenly, there would come another flash of brilliant illumination, accompanied by a dull roar.

Now they had reached the door he sought. To the horror of the boy when he turned the knob, it refused to give way. Evidently, when Mrs. Nocker went to her room earlier in the evening, she had locked the door, being more or less timid about sleeping in the big house, with only Mrs. Kelly for company, and she in a distant part of the building.

Dick commenced to pound on the door with his clenched fist. Leslie added to the din by kicking furiously at the panels.

"Tilly! wake up! wake up!" shouted Dick, using the name he had heard his mother speak so often; for this young widow of Amos Nocker had seemed almost like her own daughter to kind-hearted Mrs. Horner. "Mrs. Nocker, wake up!"

There was no reply to all this racket. Apparently, the smoke had reduced the inmate of the room to a condition where she knew next to nothing of what was going on around her.

Some boys would have been tempted to give up in despair when meeting with such apparently insurmountable difficulties. Dick was not built along that order. He no longer used his fists to pound on the door, but started to hurl himself against the panels as furiously as possible.

Again and again did he cast his whole weight forward, regardless of the shock he sustained through the impact. He could feel that with each successive smash the fastenings of the door seemed to weaken. This encouraged the boy to even greater exertions, and there was Leslie, too, adding his weight to the assault.

After half a dozen blows of this character, the door could hold out no longer, and Dick found himself staggering into the room. It was filled with smoke, though as yet the flames had not intruded.

Dick started to grope his way over to the nearest window, which, upon reaching, he threw wide open. This created a draught of air, and started the stagnant smoke to moving outwardly.

"Here they are, Dick!" he heard Leslie shouting, and it gave him a thrill just to know that he had at least made no mistake in the apartment.

The widow must have fallen asleep in her chair, for she was fully clothed, and had undoubtedly been unconsciously inhaling the suffocating smoke as she slept. Billy was in his little bed close by, his curly head almost covered by the spread, which fact Dick believed had been the main cause for his not succumbing before now.

When Dick shook him the boy aroused himself. He was drowsy, and hardly seemed to know where he was, or who had awakened him.

Dick snatched the child up in his arms, wrapping a blanket around him. Leslie, in the meantime, was shaking Tilly, with some hope of arousing her to a sense of her peril, for neither of the boys could readily carry her from the building.

He was meeting with some measure of success, too, for already Tilly had moved, and possibly the shock of finding herself surrounded by smoke would start her into fresh activity.

"Can you get her on her feet?" shouted Dick in his chum's ear.

"I'll do my best," replied the other, bravely.

"Wait for me here," Dick went on to tell him. "I'll take a look, and see if we dare risk the stairs again."

Dick had not forgotten those creeping flames that were already attacking the banisters when they ascended. He had a fear that even in so short a time they might have attained such headway as to make a further use of the stairs impossible.

No sooner had he pushed out into the upper hall than he discovered that his worst fears were realized, for the fire had made such headway that the stairs seemed to be a mass of flames, through which any descent might be reckoned impossible.

Back into the room Dick hurried. The little fellow whom he had swathed in the blanket, moved uneasily in his arms, but seemed fairly content to allow himself to be taken care of. Perhaps he

had recognized Dick's voice when the boy spoke in his ear, and felt the utmost confidence in his protector.

Once in the room, Dick found to his extreme satisfaction, that Leslie had succeeded in arousing the young woman. Tilly was able to walk by now, though still in a half stupor, and hardly comprehending what it all meant.

"How about it?" shouted Leslie, as he discovered the presence of his chum; and it must be confessed that there was considerable anxiety in his tone, for the situation looked most desperate.

"No use trying the stairs again," Dick sent back at him. "They're all afire. We must escape through a window, I reckon!"

This was not the most comforting news Leslie could have received, for when he had thrust his head out of the said window it was to see forked flames shooting from below, and twisting upwards menacingly.

Dick himself did not like the looks of things it seemed, for after a hurried examination, he drew back again.

"Cut off there, it looks like!" he called. "Along at the other window there's a better chance. Come after me, and fetch Mrs. Nocker."

The other window he kicked out as he reached it, and the jangling glass must have made a queer sound as it rattled to the ground below. One look

told Dick that so far the fire had not reached this particular section of the house. The earth lay about fifteen feet below, and had he only himself to think about a handy water pipe would have afforded him a ready means of getting down.

Placing Billy on the floor, Dick darted over to the bed he had seen in a corner of the room. From this he snatched all the covers, sheets, blankets and spread, and was back at the window in a "jiffy," as he would himself have said.

Again looking out he saw that there were moving figures down below. Some of the fire-fighters had arrived, and were hurrying around the house to find where they could best attack the flames, once the water came into the hose they carried.

Dick instantly started to shout at them, and great was the surprise of the men at discovering a head in the open window; for like most of Cliff-wood's citizens, up to then they had firmly believed the Brandon place untenanted.

"Come below here!" was what Dick called at the top of his voice. "There is a child up with us, and a lady too. The stairs are all ablaze, and we can't get down that way. You must help us!"

"All right, sonny!" shouted the foreman, whom Dick recognized as big Hen Hess, the brawny blacksmith of the town. "We'll have you out of that safe and sound, never fear. Don't jump, whatever you do!"

With that he sent several of the men hurrying away. No doubt they were intending to fetch a ladder; but impatient Dick could not wait for that. He hurried once more back to the bed, and carried the mattress with him across the room, thrusting it through the window, and allowing it to fall to the ground.

Next, he snatched up a blanket and hurled this down to the hands uplifted to catch it.

"Hold that out, for I'm going to drop the boy down!" he shouted between his two hands, held up in lieu of a speaking trumpet.

The firemen knew their business, and four of them instantly stretched the stout blanket as wide as it would go. Then Dick, without the least hesitation, held little Billy, still swathed in his covering, through the window, and let him drop.

"Bully! he's safe, all right!" exclaimed Leslie.

Tilly gave a scream when she saw Dick let her little darling drop; but on discovering that the child was safe, had once more shown that she was fully aroused to the occasion. She assisted Dick to fasten one end of some knotted sheets around her body under the arms, and was even in the act of clambering through the window, meaning to allow the boys to lower her, when Leslie gave a whoop.

"There they come with the ladder, Dick! We go down as easy as falling off a log, after all!"

CHAPTER XIX

HURRYING MATTERS ALONG

"It's coming just in time!" Dick was telling himself, when he saw what rapid headway the flames were making around that side of the house.

A delay of five minutes might have imperiled their chances for escape. And on that account, Dick was glad to see some of the firemen rushing a ladder straight toward the window, with a pack of excited people following at their heels, eager to observe what was going on.

When the ladder was placed, Dick instantly clambered out, and upon it. He did not mean that any of the firemen should have the credit for rescuing Mrs. Nocker after he and his chum had gone as far as they had.

"Help her out, Leslie," he shouted to the other; "and then you come along too."

Tilly was still frightened by all these exciting conditions, but she had seen her darling saved from the flames, and was ready to do whatever she was told. So with the help of both the boys,

she soon had her feet planted on a rung of the ladder, and had commenced the descent.

Loud shouts of approval arose from the spectators, who by now had recognized Dick and his companion.

"It's the Widow Horner's boy!" he heard one woman shrilly call out; and somehow Dick felt a flush of pride at realizing that on this occasion at least he need experience no sense of shame at being placed in the spot-light.

All reached the ground in safety, and were quickly surrounded by the exultant people. Many curious glances were cast at Tilly, for it must be remembered that she was an utter stranger in Cliff-wood, and few had even known that the Brandon house boasted an occupant.

Naturally, the first thing in Mrs. Nocker's mind was her boy. Until she had him again in her arms, she could not stop to answer any questions, or even take notice of friendly offers of temporary shelter, such as kind-hearted people were only too ready to make.

"Take me to my child!" she kept crying, half hysterically. "I want my Billy! Oh! I hope he has not been burned! Didn't you say he was safe, Dick, dear Dick? What do we not owe you! But take me to Billy, please!"

No one could blame the poor little woman for acting in this nervous fashion, after the exciting ex-

periences through which she had just gone. Least of all did Dick think of considering her weak. He was too happy over having succeeded in his task to think of Tilly in any other way than that she had shown remarkable bravery for one of her sex.

"Where is the child?" he asked one of the gaping bystanders.

"A woman took him in her arms, and carried him back yonder," was the reply, when another man chimed in with his share of information:

"It was Mrs. Pettijohn, the tailor's wife. She said she would be only too glad to take the child over to her house across the way, and give him and his mother shelter!"

"There she is talking to Jed Nocker!" added still a third member of the group, pointing as he spoke.

Nothing could hold Tilly back now, and Dick did not make any attempt to detain her, although something seemed to tell him that there was danger of his well laid plan being brought to a crisis in an unexpected and altogether hasty manner.

When they reached the spot where Mrs. Pettijohn stood with Billy, still partly swathed in his blanket, in her arms, it was to find that Deacon Nocker was demanding the possession of the little fellow.

"Give him to me, Mrs. Pettijohn!" he was say-

ing, holding out his arms entreatingly. But the woman shook her head, for she could not see why she should surrender any child to a man who had always been known to detest all young people.

"Why should I do that, Mr. Nocker?" she told him, aggressively. "You know nothing about children, and I've raised seven in my day. Besides, excuse me for saying it, but you're really the last one in all Cliffwood I'd want to hand this little darling over to just now. He'd break his heart crying just to look at your face."

"But you don't understand, Mrs. Pettijohn," urged the excited deacon, still with arms extended; "Billy and I are already good friends. We have been together every day for weeks now. He knows me, and cares a lot for me. My house is close by, and he can have everything he needs; yes, and his mother too, if she will accept of my hospitality. Billy, come to me, my fine boy, won't you?"

Billy evidently recognized the old gentleman, for he did make some sort of half movement in the arms of the tailor's wife. Just then Tilly herself pounced upon them.

Mrs. Pettijohn realized who the little woman was, and she readily surrendered the child to her motherly care. Fiercely, Tilly strained him to her heart, at the same time covering his sweet face with burning kisses! Then she would hold him

off to gaze anxiously as though still half filled with dread lest she discover some hideous mark where the cruel tongues of fire had licked his tender skin.

Billy put his arms about her neck again and again. Of course, he was too young to know what all this fuss was about, but the smoke smarted his eyes so that the tears had been running down his cheeks, and he was looking unusually charming in the eyes of the eager deacon.

Dick laid a hand on the arm of his chum. For the time being both of them apparently forgot all about the burning house, and the hustling firemen who had finally succeeded in getting a line of hose to work. Both lads were intensely interested in the little drama that was being played before their eyes, and with which they had had so much to do.

The deacon hovered close by. Evidently, he was only waiting to repeat that generous offer of his as to a harbor for the two who were without a roof to cover them. Dick wondered what Mrs. Nocker would say, now that she found herself face to face with the hard-hearted old man who had written her that cruel letter.

One of the women had been thoughtful enough to fetch the blanket along which Dick threw from the window before allowing little Billy to drop. This she wrapped the best she could about Tilly,

now shivering with the chill air; so that as she stood there she looked not unlike some Indian squaw carrying her papoose in her arms.

"Watch, Dick, for it's coming now!" said Leslie, in his chum's ear, as he saw old Mr. Nocker pushing forward, as though determined to assert his rights as the nearest neighbor.

"Pardon me, madam," they heard the deacon say, as softly as he could tone down his usually harsh voice. "Are you Billy's mother?"

Tilly did not need to be told who the old man with the stern face was. Doubtless she had watched him in secret many times when he was sitting there on that bench chatting with her child, and perhaps felt her heart fail her as she contemplated the severe expression on his countenance.

Still, Dick noticed with secret admiration that she did not quail when the supreme test came, but stood her ground bravely. It might be that Tilly felt she was doubly armed now, knowing what a firm hold Billy had taken on the affections of his grandfather.

"Yes, sir, I am Billy's mother," she said, simply.

"And I am your next door neighbor, Deacon Nocker," the old man went on to say, eagerly. "You must know that your dear little boy and I have become great chums of late. I love him with all my heart, madam, I assure you; and it was my

intention to call upon his mother very shortly. See, he recognizes me now. Billy, tell your mother we are the best of friends, won't you?"

Billy held out a hand toward him, which Mr. Nocker instantly pounced upon and gripped. Dick experienced a queer sensation when he saw the deacon actually bend his head and press several eager kisses on that little member.

"Shucks! it's nearly too soft a snap!" Leslie was muttering in the ear of his chum. "Why, he'd get down on his knees to beg her to come to him, Dick."

"Shut up, can't you?" hissed the other, not daring to remove his gaze from the exciting little tableau for even a single second. "Watch and see what happens next. There's many a slip, you know, when you think everything dead sure!"

"Huh! I guess he's landed, all right," chuckled Leslie. "Look at him fairly ready to eat the little chap, will you?"

The deacon was speaking again now, and certainly no one in all Cliffwood had ever heard him utter such pleading phrases; for as a rule he had been apt to storm and complain.

"I have a large and comfortable house, madam," he told Tilly; "and it has been very dark and gloomy for a long time now. Pity a lonely old man, please, and let a ray of sunshine come into my life. Allow me to offer you a home, just

as long as you would care to stay; and the presence of little Billy would repay me a thousand fold. Say you will come, I beg of you, for my sake, for Billy's sake!"

Of course, that was the widow's chance; and bravely did she rise to the occasion.

"I thank you, sir, for your kind offer of hospitality," she told him, "but I could never accept without explaining something that evidently you have never suspected. If I do come to your house, Mr. Nocker, it must be at your earnest request after I have told you that I am the widow of your son, and that this little darling I hold in my arms is Amos' own boy, Billy!"

CHAPTER XX

THE DEACON SURRENDERS

WHEN Mrs. Nocker said this, both the boys fastened their eyes on the old deacon, knowing what a severe shock the news must be to him. He stared hard at the young woman as though the staggering truth found some difficulty in penetrating his mind.

"Billy—you, his mother, belonging to my son Amos. I surely must be dreaming, girl! Why, that would give the child to me—his grandfather!"

Mr. Nocker jerked these fragments of sentences out as though trying hard to comprehend it all. His gaze wandered from the eager and pretty face of Tilly to the little fellow held in her arms.

"No, sir, Billy belongs to *me*, and nothing can separate him from his own mother," she told him plainly. "Where I go he goes too; where Amos' wife is not welcome, Billy can never find a home, sir. That would be as Amos must have wished if he had lived."

The deacon saw the point. He knew that he

had been worsted in the game, and perhaps, to tell the truth, the old man was not sorry, because he had been engaged in a losing fight for a long while, struggling against his better nature.

"That was a clincher!" muttered Dick, exultantly.

"You just bet it was," said Leslie, under his breath. "Look at the way he fixes his eyes on Billy, will you? There, the little chap is holding out both hands to his grandfather. Can he resist that, do you think? Well, I guess nixey."

Indeed, a grim smile was spreading over the strong features of Deacon Nocker. He was a man who had seldom been beaten in any business enterprise that had engaged his attention, so that the sensation of losing was no doubt rather novel to him. Strange to say, he acted as if he rather enjoyed it. To yield to such an antagonist as little Billy brought pleasure in its train.

He opened wide his arms, and gathered both mother and child in his embrace. And some of the good people of Cliffwood, standing respectfully near by, including Mr. Holwell, the minister, believed they saw Deacon Nocker shedding tears for the first time on record; but they were tears of joy.

Dick heaved a great sigh of relief.

"It's all over but the shouting," said Leslie, with one hand shielding his eyes from the dazzling

light of the burning house; though Dick knew very well there was another reason for his doing this, because Leslie had a tender heart.

"And," said a voice close to the two boys, "I want to congratulate you both on the splendid success of your grand scheme. I was telling Mrs. Holwell this very evening, as we sat in my study after supper, that I really began to see a great change coming over our old friend here. The secret is plainly revealed; his love for little Billy has worked wonders in his heart."

In fact, Mr. Nocker looked supremely happy as he stood there with his new-found treasures held tight in his arms. He even deigned to kiss Tilly several times, as though already he had found out his mistake in refusing to see her at the time he wrote that cruel letter.

"You will never be separated from Billy while I live," he was telling her. "My house is big and contains many costly things but when this manly little chap comes to bring sunshine into my lonely life it will hold the greatest treasure of all."

"Those words do you credit, Deacon Nocker," said Mr. Holwell, unable to resist letting the old man know how he appreciated his change of heart.

"Ah! are you there, sir?" exclaimed the other, reaching out a hand to the good man. "Then let me publicly say this: I made one terrible mistake in my life in trying to raise my boy by rod and rule

alone. Please Heaven, with this dear grandchild, love is going to enter into the scheme. This confession is the only poor expiation I can make to poor Amos."

He suddenly seemed to remember the two boys, for turning to Dick he went on to say:

"What do I not owe you, Dick Horner, and Leslie Capes, for your gallant conduct in saving these dear ones from a cruel death? After this hour I shall see boys in a different light from the past. Oh! I have been blind and foolish, wilfully so, but the boys of Cliffwood will never have occasion to look upon Jed Nocker as their enemy after this. I am a changed man."

He shook their hands almost fiercely. Indeed, Leslie writhed under the pressure of those bony digits of the excited deacon, and rubbed his crushed fingers for several minutes afterwards. This was the more singular because hitherto Mr. Nocker had been one of those cold men whose hand was apt to feel flabby when extended in greeting. He was certainly a changed man.

"I wonder what he'll say," remarked Leslie, a little later, as they stood and watched the fire ladies work like troopers in trying to save a part of the burning structure, "when they tell him what a big deal you engineered, Dick."

"As how?" demanded the other, though doubtless he could give a pretty good guess.

"Why, about setting up Tilly in housekeeping in the old Brandon place, just so Billy could wander over, and get a grip on his granddaddy's affections," explained Leslie, with a chuckle.

"Oh! as far as that goes," said Dick, instantly, with his usual generosity, "it strikes me a fellow named Leslie Capes is about as deep in the mire as I am in the mud."

"Get out!" scoffed the other, indignantly. "Didn't your mother send for Tilly to come to her house; and wasn't this scheme pretty much your invention?"

"Yes," admitted Dick, "but how about the way you joined in with me? Tell me what I could have done without your help? Didn't you interest your Uncle Henry in the game, so as to make him put up all the money needed to hire this house for Tilly and her boy, so they could be right next door to Mr. Nocker?"

Leslie laughed. To tell the truth it pleased the boy to know that Dick considered him a worthy partner. And it was just like Dick to want to share and share alike with a chum, no matter if he himself had done most of the work.

Meanwhile, the greedy flames fought hard to eat up the rest of the house, and as there was difficulty in getting a sufficient supply of water for the fire engine, at times it looked as though only a heap of ruins would be left.

Hen Hess, the blacksmith, who acted as foreman to the volunteer department, knew how to go about blocking the progress of the flames, however, and the wind changing helped him considerably.

Inside of half an hour, by furious work, the gallant fire-fighters had managed to head off the flames, and it looked as though the front half of the house might be saved.

"I heard one man say the old rookery was insured for almost its full value, anyway," Dick told several of the boys who stood there with him; "so the owner isn't going to lose much."

"Mebbe he'll take advantage of the opportunity to put up a decent modern building on the grounds," suggested Elmer Jones.

"I heard Mr. Nocker say he had a good notion to buy the place in," remarked Phil Harkness. "He even laughed when he explained that his family was getting so big now he would want more ground; and then Billy had kind of got used to this Brandon place too. Say, I have to rub my eyes when I hear that man laugh as he does now."

"Sure thing," echoed Peg Fosdick. "Why, before this it used to make me shiver to hear him chuckle; but now he shakes all over. And would you believe it, he actually turned and grabbed hands with me when I stumbled into him by accident. Whee! the old world must be coming to

an end when Jed Nocker'll do such a thing as that."

Dick found himself yawning. Now that all the excitement had died down, and the three people in whom he was so deeply interested had gone over to the Nocker house, with the fire also well under control, the boy was feeling a reaction setting in.

"Me for home and my comfy bed!" said Leslie, also gaping in sympathy. "If you feel of the same mind, Dick, let's be trotting along."

Accordingly, they turned their backs on the smouldering fire, where the volunteer department still worked industriously. On the way home it was only natural that the two chums should discuss the late occurrence, and its successful ending.

"Tilly looked happy enough," Leslie was remarking as they stood for a minute on the corner where their roads separated, both somehow a little loath to say good night.

"Well, why shouldn't she?" laughed Dick, happily. "The future of Billy was made certain, and with old Mr. Nocker as changed as he is, any little mother might be glad to have him for a father-in-law. I'm wild to tell my folks all about it. Mother will be so delighted, I know."

"And wasn't Mr. Holwell pleased, too?" continued Leslie, reflectively. "I guess he hardly understands what has happened to crabbed Deacon Nocker."

"Oh! yes he does," stoutly asserted Dick. "Mr. Holwell makes a study of human nature. He knows boys from the ground up, and sour old men as well. He told mother that love alone could redeem Jed Nocker."

"And I reckon it has," asserted Leslie.

"Well," said Dick, as the other turned away, "I'm right glad I've got that thing out of my system, anyhow."

"Yes," Leslie called back over his shoulder, "and now the next job on hand that is going to take up *my* attention is to investigate a certain gentleman who bears some earmarks of being an impostor. Never mind answering back, Dick. Good night!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BOYS' LIBRARY

"HELLO! Peg! on your way to the club room?" asked Dick, several evenings later, as he overtook the other on the road about half-past seven.

"Just what I am, Dick," replied the other, in a joyous fashion. "Tonight our new circulating library is going to be open to members for the first time. You know I was elected chief librarian, though in turn every fellow will have a chance to serve."

"You've been working pretty hard on it, I understand, Peg?" continued Dick.

"I guess I have," chuckled the other, in a pleased way. "I always put a lot of vim in anything I tackle. My dad says what's worth doing at all is worth doing well, and I'm bound to keep that rule before me. I've hustled to gather up all the books that were offered for a starter."

"How many have you on the shelves now, Peg?"

"Seventy-seven, and more promised," explained the young librarian. "Besides, we are going to make out a list of thirty new ones that Mr. Hol-

well approves, and Leslie's Uncle Henry says he will foot the bill."

"That sounds great!" declared Dick; "and I'm glad for one you had that idea come to you. I wonder what Mr. Loft over at the Free Library thinks of this new scheme?"

"I heard that he sniffed some when he first heard of it. But after Mr. Holwell had a heart-to-heart talk with him, Mr. Loft seems to have drawn in his horns. Between you and me I think he's seeing a new light. Mebbe he's beginning to be afraid this may be the entering wedge that will lose him his nice job sooner or later."

"I'd be sorry to hear that," observed Dick. "Mr. Loft belongs to the Puritan days when a man didn't dare kiss his wife on a Sunday. He ought to wake up and understand that this is the twentieth century, not the seventeenth."

"I agree with you there," said Peg, heartily. "And it may be Mr. Loft will learn something. It's never too late for that, you know, Dick."

"Guess you're right," admitted the other. "The case of Deacon Nocker proves it. He's turned over a new leaf, let me tell you. Mrs. Nocker says he's as kind as anything could be, and that both she and Billy are happy the livelong day."

The boys reached the building which had been turned over to the Y. M. C. A. as headquarters. It was well lighted up, for like most enterprising

towns of its size, Cliffwood boasted of an electric plant, as well as gas-works and a water supply.

A number of boys were in the main room, chatting, and waiting for others to come. Later on they expected to listen to a lecture by a gentleman who had been with Commander Peary in the frozen North, and had a deeply interesting story to tell, illustrated by moving pictures of the ice and snow regions.

"Here's Peg, our fine librarian!" announced one fellow as the pair entered. "Now we can see what he's been doing about that new circulating library of the Y. M. C. A. boys of Cliffwood."

"Yes, get out your key, Peg, and open the door to the little room off here," begged a second impatient member.

"Just what I mean to do, fellows," announced Peg, smiling with pleasure. "Now, don't rub it in too hard if things are not up to the standard. Given a little more time and I promise you it will look better."

When the door was opened and they trooped in, almost filling the small room that had been handed over to them for the Boys' Library, they found that several shelves were filled with books. Every one of these volumes had its own jacket made of some smooth, tough brown paper, with the title carefully printed on the back, as well as the name of the author.

On the little desk were several books in which a record could be kept concerning each and every book taken out. Peg had taken advice from older heads—Mr. Holwell among the rest—and nothing was to be left to chance. Peg was always a great hand for system, and enjoyed having an opportunity to put a few pet theories of his into practice.

"You see," explained the proud librarian, "every book here has been approved by Mr. Holwell, who has made a study of juvenile literature. He knows as well as anything that boys can't be *forced* to read books they don't like; and so he says the only way is to give them books with enough healthful adventure to make them want to read, and with the right kind of uplifting sentiment mixed in to leaven the dough."

"That's the ticket," asserted Clint Babbett, energetically. "If you want to wean boys from reading stories full of blood and thunder you've got to give them a substitute that will hold them, and yet not do any harm. Boys are queer animals, my father always says, and not one man in fifty really understands how to handle 'em. And as to women, huh, I reckon none of 'em do, after a boy gets ten years old."

"I like the way Mr. Holwell explains his theory of handling boys reading," said Dick. "He likens it to playing doctor, and giving the patient homeopathic sugar coated pills that contain the medi-

cine wanted. It pleases, and does good at the same time."

"Another thing," Peg went on to say, proudly, "every one of these volumes is as clean as new, almost. When you take one home with you it's nice to know it didn't come last from a house where they had the measles, or the scarlet fever. You see how myself, and a couple of girls who helped me, covered the whole lot."

"You deserve a bunch of thanks from the boys of the Y. M. C. A., Peg," said Clint.

"And we will see that he gets it, too," asserted Dick.

Others coming in just then, the conversation became more general, Peg being constrained to explain his system for keeping track of every book taken out by any member of the Boys' Club.

"And say," he told them impressively, "just look over these iron-bound rules we have written here on this wall chart. You'll see there is no fee asked for taking out a book, but if it's held over three days there's a penalty of a cent a day to pay. Also, if any book comes back in a bad condition the one who's responsible will have to make good."

"That's only fair," remarked Leslie Capes. "Those of us who have given over some of our private books to boost the new Boys' Library along want to feel that our interest is going to be protected."

A little while later it chanced that Peg, Dick and Leslie were sitting together, for no books could be taken out until the next meeting night, as the arrangements had not as yet been quite completed.

"I wanted to see you on the sly, Dick, for a minute or two," remarked Peg, laying a hand affectionately on the sleeve of the other.

"Does that mean for me to skip out?" asked Leslie, quickly.

"Oh! don't bother about that," Peg remarked, easily. "It isn't anything so very secret, and you can hear as well as Dick. You see it's about that prize Mr. Holwell has offered."

Of course Dick was immediately deeply interested. He also felt a quiver pass over him as of apprehension, though just why this should be he could hardly have explained if asked.

"Go on and tell us, Peg," he pleaded.

"In the first place I want you to know I didn't mean to spy on Nat, because I'm not that kind, and besides, it wasn't any of my business," Peg started in to say. "I happened to be sitting on that bench in the school grounds that stands behind the big tree, fixing my shoelace that had broken, when Nat came along with his arm through Dit's, and what did they do but stand close by me, with Nat reading some new stuff he'd just got up, he said, to add to his farce."

"Oh!" was what Dick said, though his eyes flashed with interest. "Don't tell me what it was like, Peg, because somehow it might get me started along the same line. Of course though, you can tell what you thought of it, for I'd like to know."

"I hate to say it the worst way, Dick."

"Do you mean that it sounded *good* to you, then?" asked Dick, bravely.

"I never heard anything funnier than the stuff Nat got off," replied Peg, with a grin he could not repress.

Dick and Leslie exchanged glances, the one full of encouragement, the other rather dubious. When Dit Hennesy said he thought Nat's farce was going to "bring the house down" it was bad enough; but then he was Nat's crony, and might be expected to stand up for the other. Now that Peg, a good friend of Dick's, added his unqualified approval it looked indeed serious.

"It must have been pretty good stuff then," said Leslie, grimly; "if it made you double up like that, Peg."

"It was certainly the greatest thing I ever heard," confessed Peg. "If that is original with Nat then he's sure got a heap more in that big head of his than anybody in Cliffwood ever dreamed he had. I'm sorry, Dick, it's running that way, but I thought it my duty to tell you."

CHAPTER XXII

DID UNCLE SILAS' EARS BURN?

DICK braced himself. Not for worlds did he want these chums of his to see how badly he felt at hearing such lavish praise for the effort of his foremost rival. He wanted that golden prize, and would be deeply disappointed if he failed to capture it. But his pride made him laugh now, and assume an indifferent air.

"Oh! don't worry about me, Peg," he told the other, hastily. "I'm doing my little best, but if Nat is a genius in that line, why, I suppose I'll have to knuckle down and take my medicine, that's all. I hope I've got grit enough for that."

"And you won't think of giving up, will you, Dick?" asked Leslie, anxiously.

"I was getting a little weak-kneed a while back," admitted the other, frankly; "but since then I seem to have got my second wind. No-siree, I'll fight it out on this line if it takes all winter. And say, if I do get knocked out you'll see my ship going down with her colors flying. Hear that?"

"Bully for you, Dick!" ejaculated Peg, slapping

him on the back as he arose to go to some other part of the big room. It was now filling up with older fellows and some of the town people who wanted to hear the lecture.

Dick and Leslie continued to sit there. Others were constantly passing one way or another, but paying no particular attention to the two boys; so they did not hesitate to continue their conversation as they saw fit.

"I'm glad you feel that way about keeping in the fight to the end, Dick," Leslie went on to say.

"What else can I do, now that every fellow knows I've entered for the prize?" demanded Dick. "I'm not the one to give up easily, you understand. My mother seems to think a heap of what I've done so far on that farce, and I've just *got* to finish the same, no matter if it comes in the last of the string."

"Well, there's no fear of that!" declared Leslie, positively. "I've heard enough of it to say it's just bully stuff."

"Oh! that's nice of you to say so," laughed Dick, a little harshly; "but then you're my chum, and naturally prejudiced. I thought the same when Dit told how great Nat's stuff was; but now that Peg has endorsed it too, there must be something in the thing. But I won't allow myself to get discouraged, I promise you that, Leslie. Now, let's change the subject again."

"All right, Dick. How are things going over at your house nowadays—of course, I mean with your wonderful prodigal Uncle Silas, who spent his life knocking around the world having a good time, and when old age and sickness overtook him suddenly remembered that he had a sister somewhere, and hunted her up so she could take care of him?"

Leslie spoke pretty bitterly, because this was a sore subject with him. On the other hand, Dick shook his head as though in disapproval of such radical views.

"I'd rather you didn't say such things to me, you know, old fellow," he told his chum.

"But sure you must be suspecting something like that deep down in your own heart, Dick!" protested Leslie, earnestly.

"I don't let myself think of poor old Uncle Silas that way," said Dick, firmly. "He's told us a whole lot of his struggles, and how often he thought he had his hand on a big fortune, only to get fooled time and again. And he always says that the one thing he thought of was to hunt his young sister up, if she still lived, and provide for her if fortune was kind to him."

Leslie gave an incredulous snort at hearing Dick say that.

"Bah! that's a clever little yarn he's gotten up to pull the wool over your eyes," he went on to

say, indignantly. "If he ever had struck it rich, none of you'd ever 've heard from him. Like as not he'd have gone in for a big time. But after he began to feel old age and sickness gripping him, of course he wanted to hunt Sister Polly up, and spin a tale of hard luck."

"Well, I reckon you and I will never agree on that subject, Leslie."

"I'm really surprised at you being taken in and fooled so easy, Dick."

"Perhaps it's just as you say," continued the other, "but there's something about old Uncle Silas that seems to appeal to me. I like the look in his mild blue eyes. He may have been an adventurer all his life, but for all that, Leslie, let me tell you he's a lovable old fellow, say what you will."

"Whee! he certainly has cast a spell over you folks for a fact!" declared the other, shrugging his shoulders as though almost ready to despair of Dick.

"I guess he has," admitted Dick, "for mother has taken to him even more than I have. And as for grandpop, he loves to sit and listen to Uncle Silas telling of the dozens and dozens of strange things he's run across."

"Birds of a feather flock together, they say, Dick," chuckled Leslie; "and now your fine old grandfather can exchange stories with another who

has seen a lot of lively times. But for all you say, I still hang on to my suspicions, and believe he's either an impostor, not your uncle at all, or else that he's just bent on settling down on your folks to be fed and housed for the rest of his natural life."

"All you can say isn't going to convince me," Dick told him. "Once or twice in the beginning I admit I did begin to lean that way, but I've been ashamed of feeling suspicious."

"Oh! well, let it pass," ventured Leslie. "'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise,' they say; and if you're happy in believing all that old chap stuffs into your ears why keep on being so, Dick. Only, as your friend, I've felt it my duty to warn you, that's all."

"If you want to find guilt it's easy to explain every look or chuckle or action that way," Dick went on. "As for me I have come to put considerable confidence in Uncle Silas. I'm awful sorry he's had such hard luck; and I feel sure he won't think of staying with us right along, so as to be a burden."

"But I heard your mother say only a few days ago, Dick, that if only she had a little more ready cash to meet expenses, he should never quit her house."

"That's right," quickly asserted the other, proudly. "Her heart is as big as a bushel basket."

It's one of the Horner traits, or weak points, I guess."

"Sure, and you're a Horner in the bargain," said Leslie.

"I'm afraid I am," laughed the other boy. "But if this little affair would only turn out half as well as the other one did—about Mrs. Nocker and her boy, I mean, it'd be just bunkum."

"No danger of that happening, believe me."

"Did I hear you say the books ordered by your Uncle Henry had come, Leslie?"

"Why, yes, we got notice this evening that there was a big box for us down at the railroad freight house, and it must be the books, Dick."

"Our library will look pretty fine once they're in place," remarked Dick; "and the more I get to thinking about Peg's scheme the better I like it. Let me tell you the boys of Cliffwood will owe a lot to that uncle of yours, Leslie."

"He's the right kind of an uncle to have," boasted the other, boy-like.

Just then Leslie turned around, and was immediately heard to give a low exclamation that caught the attention of his chum.

"What is it?" demanded Dick, himself turning to look.

The room was beginning to fill up with all manner of people, and many the boys knew, young and old, were moving about.

"Why, would you believe it!" snapped Leslie, "the miserable old humbug was sitting right behind us all the while?"

"Do you mean my Uncle Silas?" asked Dick, uneasily.

"Did you know he expected to come over and listen to the lecture tonight?" continued the other boy.

"He asked me some questions about it at the supper table," explained Dick, "and whether an admission fee was to be charged those who were not members of the Y. M. C. A., but so far as I remember, Uncle Silas didn't say anything about meaning to attend."

"Well, he's here all right. And say, I bet you he heard every word we said, if he's got any ears at all. He just couldn't have helped it, Dick."

Dick smiled.

"So far as I'm concerned, Leslie, I've no reason to be ashamed of anything I said. I'm only sorry if he heard you speak of him being an impostor and a fraud. Uncle Silas is pretty sensitive, I've found out. I hope it won't cause him to make up his mind to leave us in a hurry, thinking he's a burden. What little he eats doesn't amount to much, and he sure has made both my mother and grandfather happier since he dropped in among us."

Leslie looked hard at his chum, and shook his head in abject despair.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LURE OF THE STEEL RUNNERS

THE lecture was a huge success. Those who were fortunate enough to be present gave a vote of thanks to the committee that had been energetic enough to procure the services of the famous Arctic explorer without any cost to the association.

Even such restless fellows as Nat and Dit sat spellbound while the gentleman told of the wonderful things he had seen amidst the polar ice; and they held their breath with awe when he described the dangers he and his daring comrades had faced at the time they found themselves lost in the frozen wastes.

For several days afterwards it was a matter of congratulation among the boys belonging to the Junior Department that they were given an opportunity to hear such treats through the coming winter season.

Of course, there were other meetings, of a purely religious nature—meetings usually led by strong, vigorous Y. M. C. A. leaders who knew exactly how to talk to boys and influence them for

good. These meetings were usually well attended, and often prompted some wayward lad to "get a grip on himself" as Harry Bartlett expressed it, and turn over a new leaf.

"It was a lucky thing for us Mr. Holwell thought up this scheme of his," Leslie was saying on Saturday morning, as with several other fellows he shied stones on to the new ice that had formed over the big pond where the first skating was always done, to see if it was likely soon to bear a fellow's weight.

So eager were the boys of Cliffwood to get on their skates that hardly a season went by without a number of minor casualties, when the thin ice gave way, and precipitated the daring leader into the pond.

Once, several years back, a boy had actually been drowned here, but that event was by degrees being forgotten, and some of the fellows once more began to evince the old-time rashness about taking chances.

"Hardly a day passes," Andy Hale went on to say, "but what some new fellows tell me they are thinking of handing in their names, with the intention of joining the Boys' Club."

"First come, first served," chimed in Peg Fosdick. "Our number has to be limited, because the house can't hold a great many more than belong now. That's what I tell everybody."

"I've got a good notion to try that ice!" Fred Bonnicastle told them as he sat on a friendly log and commenced to fit his skates.

Possibly Fred was more passionately fond of skating than any fellow in Cliffwood. He would walk five miles willingly for a chance to spin around, and for several years now had been the first to try the new ice.

"Better go a little slow about that, Freddy," cautioned Leslie. "Of course, we all know new ice can stand a heap more than when it gets punk and rotten from thaws; but even then unless you skip along pretty fast you're apt to break through."

"And the pond is higher than ever this year, don't forget, which means more room to paddle in if you do break through," he was warned by Peg.

"You never knew me to get caught yet," laughed the other, who had a stubborn streak in his make-up. "The secret of my success has been the swallow way I dart around. The new ice will bend like india-rubber, but before it can think of cracking, shucks! I'm away off, and still going."

"There comes Dick, and from the grin on his face I'd like to wager a cookey he's just half tickled to death over something," ventured Leslie, whose quick eye had detected his chum's approach.

Dick had his skates suspended by a strap over his shoulder. Perhaps he did not really expect to have a chance to use them, but then it always made

him feel hopeful to get them out for the first time of a crisp winter morning.

"What's happened, Dick?" demanded one of the boys, as the other came up.

"You look as happy as pie," remarked Peg; "has some kind relative gone to a better country, and left you his little fortune?"

"Oh! it only means that a great big load has been lifted from my shoulders, that's all," Dick told them.

"I know what he means, fellows!" sang out Leslie. "He's finished that farce of his at last. Bully for you, Dick; I knew you'd stick everlastingly at it till the thing was done. And I hope you let us hear it from beginning to end."

"I handed it over to the committee this very morning," announced Dick. "The time limit expires on Monday, you know. They said all of the entries were in but two, and from what I've heard about Toby and Frank I'm afraid they backed out after making a try."

"But that's too bad," expostulated Peg, "because we all hoped to hear you read your farce before the committee decided on the winner."

Dick laughed, a little harshly it must be confessed.

"Well, as I've got a copy of it you may have that great pleasure still," he told them. "Perhaps it's the only chance you'll ever get, for I reckon my

effort isn't going to set the river on fire; and I've been hearing wonderful stories about another farce, which I expect will walk around my poor attempt."

Most of Dick's chums had heard more or less of the same thing, for Dit Hennesy and Alonzo Crane had taken considerable pleasure in boasting what a "screamer" Nat's effusion was going to be.

Still Peg and Elmer and the rest of them were loyal to Dick. They had seen him gain the goal many times in races and games, even when the odds were against him; and fully believed he must come again under the line first.

"Talk never wins a race, Dick," said Leslie.

"And lots of fellows do their shouting before the end," remarked Peg. "I'm banking on you to cop that prize, no matter what Nat says."

"And remember," added Elmer, "you've as good as promised to let us hear the sketch from beginning to end at the first favorable opportunity."

"It's kind of you to want to hear it, that's all I've got to say," laughed the author. "Anyhow, a load is lifted off my shoulders. Good or bad, it's got to stand. I'm through bothering over it. If Nat's done something that throws mine in the shade, all right. I'll have to grin and bear it. And now, please let up on that subject. I want to forget it for a while."

"Well, here goes!" announced Fred Bonnicastle, as he rose to his feet.

"Are you really meaning to make a test of the ice, Fred?" asked Dick, dubiously. "It looks mighty thin to me, and I can see several places where the big rocks that have been dropped on the same have broken through."

"Oh! I'm a wonder when it comes to skimming over thin ice," boasted the other, really anxious to keep up to his reputation for recklessness, and once more open the season as the first to try his skates.

"Better keep near the shore, then," advised Leslie. "If you do break through you will only be up to your waist, and can wade out."

"Don't worry!" scoffed Fred, as he balanced himself on one skate at the edge, and took a quick survey of the big pond, as though deciding upon his course, "I can swim if it comes to it, you know. And somebody has got to be the first to do stunts on the new ice."

With that he suddenly darted away.

"Whee! listen to it crack, will you?" exclaimed Peg.

"Oh! new ice always does that," asserted Leslie. "I like to hear it snap on a frosty morning like this. But say, you can see it bend like anything under his weight. I don't believe I care to try it yet awhile. I'm more hefty in weight than Fred, and never could whip along like he does."

The venturesome skater was going with the speed of the wind, and thus far he had kept within a reasonable distance from the shore. Apparently, he meant to go completely around the pond, leaving the white marks of his sharp runners on the clear ice, to prove himself the first on skates for the season.

"Just as fine as silk, fellows!" he called out as he approached the group. "Some of the rest of you had better take a spin along with me. Not a bit of danger if you keep on the jump."

No one seemed tempted, however. They had seen how the thin ice gave under Fred as he went on, and knew that it was only the rapidity of his flight that kept him from breaking through. Should one of his skates become loose, so as to delay his progress, the chances were as ten to one he must meet with a catastrophe.

"I'm going to take another round!" called out Fred over his shoulder. "And then watch me cut straight across the middle of the pond."

"I guess he means that, too!" declared Leslie, uneasily. "Fred gets more reckless every year. I'm afraid something will happen to him yet."

"It's a good thing," observed Dick, who had been looking around meanwhile, "that there's a heap of old boards lying right close by, taken from that high fence. If he does break through we'll need the same, you can just believe."

"Why, it's ten feet deep out in the middle!" asserted Peg.

"And the further he goes away from the shore the more the sheet of ice is bound to bend under him," said Elmer. "If he keeps his word every fellow fasten to one of the boards, and be ready to shove it out."

"He never could climb up on that thin ice, once his clothes get soaked," Dick continued, "and before he could break his way to shore he'd be exhausted."

The skater soon came around again, going very fast. He waved a hand flippantly to his friends on the shore, and changing his course suddenly darted directly out toward the middle of the big pond.

The other boys ran to the pile of boards, and each picked one of the planks up. Hardly had they done this than there was a shout of alarm, a crash, and a splash, and reckless Fred Bonnicastle had vanished from sight!

CHAPTER XXIV

A LESSON IN LIFE SAVING

"OH! Fred's broken in!" shouted Peg Foss-dick, in alarm.

"And right in the middle of the pond, too!" echoed Leslie.

"Get busy!" roared Dick, who had been holding himself in readiness for just such an emergency from the moment he had heard the reckless skater announce his intention of skimming across the pond from shore to shore.

Dick had his little plan of campaign all mapped out in his mind. He had a happy faculty for this sort of thing. In a flash he could grasp details that would have taken some other fellows a minute or two to figure out.

"Fetch the boards along in a hurry!" he shouted over his shoulder, for by that time he was fully under way.

Straight to the nearest point of the shore line he rushed and dropped his plank. It extended out on the ice in a bee-line for the spot where poor Fred was splashing and scrambling like mad, try-

ing in his excitement to climb up on the ice, only to have it break away, and precipitate him again into the cold water.

Dick took the second board from Leslie, who was the first of the others to arrive.

"Go back and get another!" he told his chum sharply, taking it upon himself to act as the leader. His chums were so accustomed to seeing Dick in the van that no one ever dreamed of questioning his right to act in that capacity. "We'll need a heap of 'em, I'm afraid," he added.

So Leslie obediently whirled on his heel and hurried back to the pile. Dick took the plank Elmer offered him, and stepping out to the end of the second one dropped it also in a direct line.

Then came Peg, almost forgetting his usual limp in his anxiety to be of service to the imperiled comrade battling for his life out there in the middle of the deep pond. A fourth board was thrown over the smooth ice so that Dick could reach it without stepping off his safe harbor; for as his weight was now distributed over ten or twelve feet of surface, instead of being concentrated in one spot, there was no danger of his breaking through.

The boys worked like beavers, Dick handling the planks as they came along in a master-workman manner. Gradually but surely the line was being extended out toward the scene of all the commotion, where Fred continued to struggle.

While he worked so heroically, Dick did not forget to keep calling out encouragement to the imperiled boy.

"Don't tire yourself out so, Fred!" he told the other. "It's all right, and we're bound to get you out of there in a jiffy. Just hold on to the ice, and give us a chance to do something. We're coming as sure as anything. Keep a grip on yourself, and don't let go the ice for your life, Fred!"

Of course the further Dick got from the shore the more difficult it was to shove each new plank out to him. As no one dared step on the ice itself the boys were compelled to run out over the board line, deliver their burden, and then make back to the safety of the shore before the next one could start.

Two more planks would do the business, the second to be used sideways so as to afford a landing-stage, as Dick would have called it.

"Oh! hurry, Dick!" gasped Fred. "I'm mighty near all in, I tell you!"

"Forget that!" cried Dick, boisterously, and after that he kept on talking in a cheery manner to Fred, his intention being to make the other keep his mind off his condition of utter exhaustion.

The next plank brought him close to the hole which by this time was a pretty big one, as Fred had thrashed around furiously in the endeavor to help himself.

"Steady now, old fellow!" said Dick, as he crept out on his hands and knees, so as to come in touch with the other, and give him renewed confidence. "Peg's fetching the last plank, and we'll use it along the edge here, so you can get your knee on the same. Then I'll drag, and you'll shove, and out you're going to come as neat as pie. Hurry, along, Peg, and then stand by to help!"

While saying this, Dick was gripping the chilled hand of Fred, whose eyes, filled with horror, were glued appealingly on his face.

"You won't let me drop back, will you, Dick?" chattered the other between his rattling teeth, for the tremendous excitement and the cold water combined had taken his courage completely away.

"Not much!" asserted the boy who crouched on the plank. "See, here's Peg right behind me with that board. Shove it along so I can place it where it's going to do the most good, Peg. There you are, with a regular landing-stage that won't break away when you climb up. Now, brace yourself, Fred, for a big effort; and you Peg, grip hold of my coat in the back so as to keep me steady when I pull!"

The boys clustered on the shore watched with their hearts in their throats, so to speak, for they realized that the crisis was at hand.

Dick took a fresh grip on Fred's hand.

"Up you come, old fellow! Do your level best

this time, and it's going to be all right! That's the ticket! Whoop! here you are as safe as could be!"

Loud shouts arose from Leslie and the rest of the group when they saw the dripping Fred emerge from the water, and gain a position on the first plank. The treacherous ice did not break under his weight because the fence board covered such a wide section that it was evenly distributed.

"Can you creep along after me, Fred?" demanded Dick.

"Sure thing!" came the reply, though Fred could hardly speak on account of the way his teeth were rattling together.

Of course Dick kept close watch over his shoulder from time to time as he headed for the shore; but Fred managed to get to his feet presently, and hurried along after his rescuer.

He was greeted boisterously by the other fellows. No one chided him on account of his reckless act; they were all too full of gratitude over the rescue to think of "rubbing it in."

"Now make a bee-line for home as fast as you can run," advised Dick, after he and Leslie had unfastened the skates from Fred's shoes. "Keep swinging your arms and coming down hard with your feet as you run. Hurry, the ice is beginning to form on your shoes and clothes!"

With that Fred started off on the run. He was shivering, and still weak from his recent exper-

ience, and while knowing what a fright it would give his mother to see him coming home in that condition, he also understood that he must get into dry clothes as soon as possible, or suffer serious results.

"Now, if we'd been away off somewhere, with no house near by," remarked Leslie, as with the others he stood and watched Fred gallop homeward; "we'd have had to build a couple of fires, and strip Fred so we could rub him down while his duds were getting dry. But his mother'll fix him all right."

"Whew! what a splash he did make out there!" exclaimed Peg.

"I'm glad it wasn't me," remarked Elmer; "because I'm afraid my father'd take my skates away for the rest of the winter. He doesn't believe in boys being so reckless."

"All the same," Andy Hale went on to say, "I noticed, Elmer, that you ran out there on the planks several times, and if the ice had given way you'd have been as deep in it as Fred."

"Oh! that was another thing," replied Elmer. "It was to save life that I took a chance, and my father always told me he'd stand for that every time. I'm not meaning to tell him a word about this, but he'll hear from other people. I know he'll ask me if I was in the bunch, and did my little stunt with the rest. I'd hate to tell him I just

stood by, and never raised a hand to help poor Fred."

"All of you deserve the highest praise," said Dick. "We worked together, and I'm sure I never could have got a plank out to Fred before he gave up the ghost and sank, without your help."

Of course there was no more temptation for any of them to make use of their skates.

Accordingly, the party wended its way back to town, and the news of Fred's mishap was soon common talk. Perhaps it might serve to arouse the authorities to some action looking to forbidding skating on the big pond until the ice was considered safe for a crowd.

"How about meeting somewhere this very afternoon," suggested Leslie, as they stopped on a corner before scattering to their various homes. "Maybe Dick will read his farce to us."

"A bully idea!" Peg declared, and others immediately echoed his words.

Dick smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Seems as if you're bent on having it," he said; "and it proves you a bold lot of chums. Well, I'd like to know what you think of it, so let's get together in the room Leslie has fitted up in their barn, where he's a stove handy. I'll be around at two o'clock when my chores are done. But don't expect too much, please."

CHAPTER XXV

DICK HAS A SELECT AUDIENCE

PROMPTLY at two o'clock Dick made his appearance at the Capes' barn. Leslie had been given the man's room, which was vacant, to fit up for a den. As most boys delight to do, he had the walls decorated with college banners, and all manner of things connected with outdoor sports.

It made a cheery place where the boy and his friends could spend an hour or two in reading or playing games. As a rule Dick passed considerable time there in company with his best chum; and many of their plans of the past had actually been hatched amidst those congenial surroundings.

Dick found his friends impatiently awaiting his coming. Besides Leslie, there were Phil, Clint, Peg, Andy and Elmer sitting or lounging there, with the little stove making the room very comfortable.

"Here he is, and on time in the bargain!" exclaimed Andy.

"But with not a minute to spare," added Clint. "If it'd been anybody but you, Dick, I'd have be-

gun to think we might be left in the lurch; but nobody ever knew you to go back on your word."

"Well, I felt pretty much like crawfishing this time, I own up," laughed the latest arrival; "because it seemed like a whole lot of nerve for me to come here meaning to impose on you with my poor stuff."

"Huh! just let us be the judge of that, won't you, Dick?" demanded Leslie. "And say, I'm glad to see you've fetched your old banjo along."

"Good boy!" cried Elmer; "I take it you've gone and got up some coon songs and choruses, and mean to let us come in strong on the last named."

"That's a little secret," laughed Peg, "but it needn't be held in any longer. Just the other day Susie Banks told me how she and Connie Swazy, the Judge's pretty daughter, got up the music score for your words, Dick. And knowing what a fine musician Connie is I'm wild to hear the combination."

"Well, all of you find soft spots, so if you drop flat at hearing some of the excruciating jokes my end-men get off you won't be hurt much," warned Dick, pretending to be very serious.

"We're willing to risk all that, Dick," Peg told him, confidently.

"One reason why we want to hear your farce, Dick, if you must know it," said Elmer, frankly,

"is this: You know we've every one of us been picked out by Mr. Holwell to take part in the minstrel show those two nights after New Years. Each fellow has some specialty to carry through; and then some of us are going to take a hand playing in the black farce, no matter which one wins the prize."

"Yes," added Peg, "and we've got a heap of personal interest in the matter besides. All of us are banking on you to win that twenty-five dollars in gold. We're boosting your claims to beat the band."

"Are you all ready, and prepared for the worst?" asked Dick, as he settled himself comfortably to read his little farce, on which he had spent many hours after the rest of the family had retired to their beds.

"Let her go, Dick; and do your best to bring out the strong points," begged Peg.

"When I come to a song," explained the author, "I'll try to give it to you the best way I can, though better singers are to be chosen to carry the refrain, and one of them I understand is going to be Peg here."

"How about the choruses—we all join in there, I understand?" demanded Elmer.

"I'll give you slips of paper with the words of the chorus printed on them by typewriter," explained Dick; "and then play the air, so you can

follow it. According to my mind the music is going to be the best part of this black farce."

"Listen to him, will you?" scoffed Andy Hale. "Dick says that because the music is the only thing some one else got up, and Connie Swazy at that. Of course it's bound to be good, because that girl is a regular genius along those lines. But all the same, there are others. Now get away, Dick."

If any one had happened to be passing along the road a little later he must have been deeply puzzled to account for the hilarious shouts that occasionally broke out from the Capes' barn on that particular Saturday afternoon. Boyish laughter it surely was, and the listener would have certainly come to the conclusion that Leslie and some of his friends were having a royal good time of it there, no matter what engaged their attention.

They laughed at Dick's jokes until they were weak. Then after Dick had twanged his banjo in his clever fashion, and given them the first stanza of a coon song, he played the catchy music of the smashing chorus, after which all of them joined in with a roar, as they were accustomed to doing with their familiar school songs.

After the first song had been sung several times, by request, the boys could not refrain from giving vent to their enthusiasm.

"That's as fine a thing as I ever heard!" declared Elmer, radiantly.

"Words and music are just immense!" said Andy. "There's something worth while in the sentiment too, which counts. So many of these ragtime things are the silliest stuff going. And say, Connie did herself proud when she got up that air. I'll have to keep watching all the while not to be humming it, and giving the snap away long before the time comes."

The others, too, had words of praise for Dick's modest little farce as far as they had heard him give it.

"Why," said Andy Hale, seriously, "if it keeps on like that all the way through, old fellow, it's going to make Nat's effort look like thirty cents, I wager."

"Oh!" said Leslie, who was feeling very happy to hear them shower all this praise on Dick, "that's only a sample of what he's got up his sleeve. The best is yet to come. Wait till you hear that 'Oh! Susannah' song and chorus; it'll make you shake all over; and then the music is simply great!"

"Shut up, Leslie, can't you?" admonished Dick. "You'll queer me if you get them expecting so much. Now, if you've caught your second wind, and feel you can stand some more, get ready to weep!"

Instead of that, they roared the louder. Sometimes they lay back and shook as if utterly exhausted, laughing at the comical situations, as well

as the words Dick put in the mouths of his eight characters who were supposed to be acting the farce.

When the second song was reached, they had to beg Dick to wait a little until they could recover their breath before breaking into the chorus. And how they did shout it out in concert, as though words and music exactly suited their ideas of what a negro melody should be.

So it went on until the end, when a final scene brought the house down. A last song completed the work of the aspiring author. When the boys had repeated the chorus for the third time, Dick begged them to halt, and stopped twanging the strings of his banjo.

"Well, what's the verdict?" he demanded, bravely. "Think it's got a ghost of a show against Nat's farce?"

"The fellow who could beat that would have to sit up all night, and be a genius in the bargain!" declared Elmer, positively.

"Why, not even a professional song and farce writer could equal some of the parts you've got in there!" declared Andy Hale. "I have to rub my eyes and look again to believe you could originate so much droll stuff. And such fetching songs! As for Nat, shucks! he'll never have half a show, believe me."

"And the rest of us who dared make a try will

be in the also-ran class," chuckled Phil Harkness.

"It was mighty good, and that's a sure thing, Dick!"

Dick could not help noticing that it was Peg who said this. He also remembered how Peg had overheard Nat reading a part of his farce to one of his cronies. Peg then was the only person qualified to judge between the two rival efforts, because he alone had heard something of each. And Peg was not as enthusiastic as the rest, for had he not only said "it was mighty good, Dick?"

That was the fly in the ointment. It seemed to take away much of the pleasure and confidence that otherwise Dick must have obtained from hearing his praises sung so confidently by the rest.

"Now you've heard my little farce," he told them, "please don't speak of it to me again. I want to forget all about it for a while. The committee will take a week to decide which one they like best. When we have our next meeting their decision is going to be announced to the crowd, and then the agony will be over."

"Here's wishing you every success going, Dick!" cried Peg, with vim.

They slapped Dick on the back, and soon had him laughing heartily; though when he found himself alone again he was bound to brood over the fact that Peg, who had heard a portion of Nat's effusion, had simply said Dick's was good.

"After all, this minstrel show is going to be only one thing Mr. Holwell has in mind for the boys of the Y. M. C. A.," remarked Clint. "He's planning a lot of other affairs for the late winter; and I heard him say that he hoped when vacation time came along we might camp out somewhere, and have a royal good time of it."

"If we do," ventured Andy, "I certainly hope he picks out Russabaga Lake for the trip. I've always wanted to camp on that wonderful Bass Island that we've heard so much about. If I get a chance I'm going to speak to Mr. Holwell about it."

The boys sat around and talked for some little time, and then some of them having things they wanted to do started home. When Dick, being the last to leave, was going, Leslie smacked him on the back and said cheerily:

"Make no mistake, old fellow, that farce is going to come under the wire a winner!"

"Thank you, Leslie," Dick replied, and somehow this unflinching confidence shown by his dearest and best chum helped to buoy up his spirits when doubts again assailed his heart.

CHAPTER XXVI

BAD NEWS

"HERE'S a letter for Grandpop Horner, Dick. The postman met me at the corner, and I guess he must have known I was headed for your house because he just handed it over and asked me to deliver it."

Leslie, as he said this, held up the letter in question. He had met Dick at the gate of the little Horner cottage, as the latter was about setting out on some errand.

It was on the afternoon just before Christmas, and the winter had fully set in. There was a trace of snow on the ground, and the ice was in excellent condition for skating. Doubtless many a young person in Cliffwood, who anticipated receiving a new pair of skates on the following happy morning, was hoping that no cloud would come up to cover the fine sheet on the pond with snow before they had a chance to break in their cherished present.

Dick took the letter and looked hard at it. When he saw it was addressed on a typewriter,

and that in the upper left-hand corner there was printed the name of a law firm in New York, somehow he was seized with a sense of coming trouble.

He knew that his grandfather had his little savings in a certain enterprise that heretofore had yielded fair profits. This sum of money, together with the pension that the Government paid the veteran, had barely sufficed to keep the wolf from the door of the Horner home for years.

"I hope it isn't bad news I've fetched you, Dick?" ventured Leslie, uneasily, for he had seen that frown gather on the forehead of his chum, and could give a pretty fair guess as to what caused it.

"Oh! I hardly think that could be," replied Dick, trying to smile cheerily. "With Christmas coming tomorrow it would be pretty tough for grandpop to get bad news. I was only going on a little errand, so I'll turn back and give it to him."

Leslie was almost as much at home in Dick's humble dwelling as in his more spacious home; so he did not hesitate to follow at his chum's heels when the other hurried back to the door.

"Here's a letter for you, Grandpop," remarked Dick, as he entered.

The old veteran was sitting by the fire, droning over his pipe, and the paper which came in the morning mail. He aroused himself at the infor-

mation, for letters were few and far between at the Horner home, so that the receipt of one always caused more or less interest. Mrs. Horner came in from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron; even little Sue ceased playing with her favorite cat, and looked up expectantly.

Grandpop turned the letter over and over. Plainly he was a bit afraid to tear it open, for his aged hands shook visibly, and he could be seen pressing his lips firmly together as though summoning all his resolution to the fore.

That imprint of a legal firm dismayed him. His dealings with lawyers had been few, and perhaps not of an altogether pleasant nature at that. Finally, he seemed to reach a point where he could wait no longer, so he managed to detach a strip of the envelope.

The enclosure was in typewriting like the address. All of the others watched grandpop earnestly as he first rubbed his glasses so as to get a little more time, and then started in to read the letter.

Uncle Silas had been lying down on the well-worn sofa. He sat up and seemed to be deeply interested. Leslie, as usual, was watching the wanderer closely; possibly the boy even allowed himself to wonder whether sly Uncle Silas' presence there could have any connection with the coming of this mysterious missive.

Then grandpop uttered a low groan, though he tried bravely enough to crush it.

"Oh! what is it all about, Father?" exclaimed Mrs. Horner, darting forward to put her supporting arm about the old man, who seemed to waver in his seat.

The veteran drew his quivering hand caressingly over her hair several times. He had some difficulty in mastering his emotions; but the old soldier spirit in him was not yet dead, and he succeeded in regaining control over his nerves.

"Bad news, Daughter, I'm sorry to say," he told her.

"Is it about your investment?" she asked, showing that she had been entertaining fears in that direction for some little time.

"Yes, yes, that is it," he said, as well as his trembling lips could form the words. "This lawyer tells me the company has been in difficulties for some time, though they kept hoping to bridge over their trouble. But something happened that they had not counted on, and they went under with a smash. He says they may be able to pay thirty cents on the dollar, but it will take time even at that to realize on their properties."

Mrs. Horner, deeply moved, took the letter from his unresisting hand, and looked it over. The fatal news was written in a cold unfeeling fashion, for lawyers could not be expected to sympathize

with unknown clients. The firm offered to act for Mr. Horner in the matter for the ordinary fee, to be paid when any money was recovered.

Dick and Leslie too could easily read all this. The former was sadly dazed, and Leslie felt shocked. The latter knew that the Horners had had little enough to live upon for some years, and if half of their meagre income were suddenly snatched away in this cruel manner, it would mean a serious matter.

It was wonderful, however, how quickly the old man managed to recover from the blow. His one thought was to shield those who were so dear to him.

"Well," they heard him say bravely, "I have been taking my ease too long as it is, and tomorrow—no, the day after Christmas, I mean to start out and visit my friends to see if there is not some employment I may obtain. I used to be a good hand at figures, and could keep a set of books fairly well. Don't worry too much Polly, dear; it will all come out right yet. You know they say it is always darkest before dawn."

Leslie winked a good many times even while he smiled at the idea of that weak old gentleman, who found it so difficult even to walk in the garden, striking bravely out to try to find work. There was a suspicious moisture in the boy's eyes, for he was deeply affected.

"That would be a nice thing, wouldn't it, Grandpop!" declared Dick stoutly; "for a husky fellow like me to keep on going to school while you worked in an office. I reckon it's going to be me who'll get busy, and pay for my salt. I've been thinking about just that sort of thing for some time. It was bound to come, and this letter has only hurried things along a little."

Leslie felt it his duty to slap his chum on the back when he heard this. No one knew better than he what a sacrifice it would mean to Dick to quit school; for the boy's heart was set on securing a good education, since he had planned a career for himself that could never be attained unless he went to college.

Uncle Silas had listened to all this talk in silence. No one seemed to remember him at all just then, one way or another. Even Leslie neglected to watch him. Had he done so he might have seen all sorts of emotions chasing each other across the weather-beaten face of the wanderer.

"I can't tell you how badly I feel to hear this sad news, Sister Polly," he now hastened to remark, coming forward with a look of apparently deep interest on his countenance. "It compels me to say what I have been meaning to for some little time. I must be going on my way. You have been kindness itself to a poor old health-broken chap, the rolling-stone that could gather no moss. Now

it is time for me to relieve you of my presence, which must not become a burden on your slender resources."

At that Mrs. Horner looked doubly distressed; while grandpop shook his white head in the negative.

"Please don't speak of leaving us just yet, Brother," said Dick's mother. "All of us I am sure would miss your cheery ways very much. Father has seemed so happy with you for company, and I began to believe he was getting younger every day of your stay. And you said you had no other home."

"But my dear sister, every little counts now with you, and I am unable to work any longer, much as I should like to buckle to," remonstrated Uncle Silas, just as though he meant every word he said.

"Oh! but what you eat does not matter much," she told him, affectionately, as she laid a loving hand on the wanderer's arm. "Stay with us a little longer, Silas, and perhaps the skies will brighten. I seem to have faith that the tide must turn soon now; and we have been a happy family together, you know."

Uncle Silas was affected even to tears, and he turned aside as though ashamed of giving way to a weakness. Leslie saw this, but being of a skeptical turn of mind, especially in connection with

everything that concerned the wanderer, he rubbed his chin in his odd way, and muttered to himself:

"His eyes looked watery, all right; but mebbe after all they were crocodile tears. Some people can make themselves cry even on the stage. But I wonder what the old fellow's game can be? One thing sure, I bet you he doesn't mean to skip out of the comfy nest he's struck after all his wanderings."

Indeed, Uncle Silas was soon exerting himself to raise the drooping spirits of the others, and even began to joke in a way he had never done before.

"Why should we allow ourselves to mope, and feel badly when tomorrow morning will be Christmas," he told them several times. "Something may happen to make this old world look brighter to our eyes. You know what you read in the lesson, Grandpop—'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.' Let's hope so, anyway."

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT HAPPENED ON CHRISTMAS EVE

As the evening set in Dick felt his gloomy fears increase rather than diminish. It was strange, too, because as a general thing the boy had always been of a cheery disposition, and able to stand up under all manner of ordinary troubles.

He was not thinking of himself at all. What sacrifices the new plan he had in mind entailed did not count in the least. It was mother, and dear old grandpop, Dick was so anxious about. He knew how in times past they had frequently been forced to scrimp and save in order to enjoy a few things they craved; and now it would be harder than ever to make ends meet.

Still, Dick found that after supper had been dispatched he was feeling in a better humor. Perhaps the meal had something to do with this; then again the fact that it was Christmas Eve was to be considered, for after all Dick was a lad whose spirits were buoyant.

Perhaps, too, the way in which Uncle Silas tried to make them forget the new trouble may have had

something to do with the change in his feelings. Indeed, never had the wanderer shown himself in such a happy mood. It seemed as though he must be exerting himself to the utmost with the idea of making the others forget.

The stories he told of his life in the frozen North, where men hunted for the hidden gold amidst glaciers and snowbanks, were full of rollicking humor. He had dear old grandpop laughing heartily at his comical descriptions; and Dick confessed that having Uncle Silas there at such a time of distress was as good as a tonic.

A knock at the door came about eight o'clock. Dick went to see who was there. As a rule, he would have expected to find one of his chums, or a neighbor; but tonight he felt nervous, and half anticipated discovering an unwelcome visitor in the shape of some officer, who would tell them their home was to be attached for debt.

"Good evening to ye, Dick," said a voice. "Mr. Nocker he says I am to give ye this same package, which is from his daughter, and little Billy."

"Oh! is it you, Pat?" remarked Dick, considerably relieved. "All right, I'll take it in; and be sure to tell them all we send them a lot of thanks for remembering us, and hope they'll have a real Merry Christmas."

It was quite a package, and Dick laughed as he placed it on the table.

"To think of them remembering the Horners at Christmas," he remarked, as she stared at the package. "I guess after all it isn't going to be such a dull time for some of us. Shall I open it now, Mother, or leave it till the morning?"

"Suit yourself, Son," she told him. "Many people give their gifts the night before Christmas; and perhaps you'll sleep better if you see what it contains now."

"Well, I believe I'll just have to do it," said Dick, with which he soon whipped the heavy cord off the package.

"Looks like a new suit of clothes for somebody!" chuckled Uncle Silas.

Dick snatched up the coat, and examined it. A small tag bore some writing, and he saw that it was a pretty card decorated with red Christmas flowers, and bearing a few words which he read aloud:

*"To Dick, from little Billy, wishing him
the happiest Christmas of his whole life!"*

"Oh! but ought I take such a thing from them, when Mr. Nocker is the one who will have to pay the bill?" said Dick, wonderingly.

"Why not?" demanded Uncle Silas, promptly. "If he sent you a dozen such presents he could never begin to pay back the debt he owes you.

Didn't you plan the scheme that gave him the treasures he now has in his gloomy old mansion? And only for your bravery and quick action might he not have lost them both in that fire? Don't you hesitate for a minute, Dick, to accept this little gift."

"But here's something more, and for you, Mother!" exclaimed the boy, excitedly.

It proved to be a nice warm fleecy worsted shawl for her shoulders. And a third package turned out to be a delightful smoking jacket for the old veteran, in which he would find great joy and comfort as he sat by the open fire winter days.

All of them were delighted with their gifts. Uncle Silas pretended to be quite disappointed because he too had not been remembered.

"Seems like I'm the only one left out in the cold," he laughed, merrily. "But then I'm a new comer here, and haven't any right to expect much. Perhaps if I hung up my stocking tonight, like we used to do when we were youngsters, Polly, old Santa Claus might take a notion to slip just a *little* remembrance in the same. Now, just for luck, let's all do it. It brings back happy days to even speak of such a thing. And for once let's forget trouble as though we were children again."

His sister smiled, a little sadly it must be confessed.

"If it will please you, Silas," she told him,

"we will agree; though no one must expect much. Our intentions are tremendous, but sad to say we are hampered by conditions that tie our hands. But even a little gift may carry worlds of love with it."

Dick had provided a small tree, and they all sat up late decorating it. Even old grandpop insisted on tying a few baubles to the branches, in memory of the days when he used to do the same for the children who were now gone.

Little Susie had of course been put to bed before this, for the tree was mainly intended for her delight; though the others found more or less pleasure in its decoration.

And there were five stockings hung up alongside the fireplace; Susie had insisted on fastening one borrowed from her mother, since she naively remarked that her own might be too small for what the good fairies meant to bring her, and she would not want to miss anything for lack of room.

After Dick went to his little room and retired, he lay there a long time, utterly unable to lose himself in sleep. The blow that had fallen that afternoon had given him a shock, and try as he would he could not get it out of his mind.

Lying there he could see through his open door the flickering of the firelight in the living-room beyond, where the little Christmas tree stood in all its brave finery. When the blaze came up he could

even count the five stockings hanging there, each with something in it, for they had contrived to do this before separating for the night.

Dick sighed many times. He somehow was thinking of that golden prize which Mr. Holwell had offered for the best farce, and which would be awarded a few nights after Christmas. If only he had won that there were so many things he had planned to buy with the twenty-five dollars that would have made the Great Day seem so much more joyful.

Dick, lying there, suddenly became aware of the fact that some one was moving in the other room. He even half raised his head to look, and when the fire picked up a little, discovered that it was Uncle Silas.

"To be sure," Dick told himself, "I remember now that he didn't think to put anything in the stockings when we turned in, and he's meaning to do that now. But the poor old chap has mighty little to spare. Still, half a dollar given in the right spirit would mean as much as a thousand times the same from a rich man."

Dick felt enough curiosity to watch Uncle Silas. He saw the wanderer fumbling with the different stockings. He even had the assurance to pull out what they contained and glance at the small offerings. When Dick saw that he seemed to be moved by some emotion, he himself felt a little annoyed.

"I hope now he isn't laughing at what we've given him," he muttered half under his breath. "He's certainly as full of curiosity as a youngster waking up in the moonlight, and creeping out of bed to see what Santa has left for him; and that's what I did once myself. There, he's satisfied now, anyway, and is trotting off to his cot again."

After that Dick again set himself the task of trying to get to sleep, though he found it the hardest kind of work. Even this latest strange action on the part of Uncle Silas worried him. He remembered all that Leslie had ever said about the wanderer. Could it be possible that Uncle Silas *was* an impostor; or that he had actually planned to come and settle down on his poor sister, to be taken care of for the balance of his natural life?

"Oh! shucks! forget all that stuff, can't you?" Dick scolded himself as he turned once more with his back to the open door, so as to shut out the flickering firelight. "Uncle Silas is all right, and you know it. He's only a little queer in the upper story. You know he told how he was struck on the head once by a falling rock, and nearly killed. Now go to sleep, so you'll feel fresh when morning comes."

Nevertheless, it must have been close on to midnight when Dick finally managed to drop off. What his dreams were no one ever knew, but at least he did sleep until the sun was above the hori-

zon on that bright Christmas morning, which was something unusual for him, as he always attended to the chores promptly in order to save the little mother steps.

So Dick hastily dressed, his mind beginning to fill once more with a confusion of anxieties and hopes, as all that had taken place on the previous afternoon and evening trooped through his active brain.

"Tomorrow I'll begin to look for a situation," he was saying as he finished his dressing. "Perhaps better days will be coming along later on, when I can complete my education. I can hear mother in the kitchen; perhaps she may need something, so I'll find out."

"Nothing to be done, Son," Mrs. Horner announced, after kissing him warmly, and returning his greeting of a Merry Christmas. "But I hear some one knocking at the front door, so go and answer, for I think I saw Leslie pass the kitchen window."

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNCLE SILAS, THE WIZARD

"HELLO! there! Merry Christmas to you, Dick, old chum!" exclaimed Leslie, as he pushed in through the door as soon as it was opened. "Here's a little something I know you've been wanting this long while."

"Oh, my stars! a pair of dandy hockey skates!" gasped the astonished Dick, as he tore the paper from the package that had been thrust into his hands. "You've just about knocked me silly, Leslie, for a fact. And my present to you is such a little one, too."

"Little!" echoed the other, holding up the book he had taken from its wrappings. "Why, I've been meaning to get this for over half a year. And the best of it is you earned every cent it cost, while I had most of my money from my folks. It's worth ten times as much as what I paid for the skates, every time, and don't you forget it."

"The finest skates I ever saw," said Dick, joyously, as he again examined his present. "I can

see what bully times I'll have this winter—that is of nights, after I get home from work."

"Oh! rats! don't say that as if you meant it, Dick. If you leave school I'll never have the heart to keep on to graduation time. You know how we planned to stick together through thick and thin. I'll ask dad to let me start working, too, see if I don't."

"That would be silly of you," Dick told him. "But let's try to forget it all, for one more day. Time enough to bother when tomorrow comes."

"What's this I see!" exclaimed Leslie, humorously. "Five stockings hung up in a row; and here's little Susie beginning to look into hers, after she's done staring at the gay tree. What luck did you have, Dick?"

"Oh! I hadn't thought to look yet," admitted the other. "In fact, I overslept, and had just gone into the kitchen to see if I could help mother with breakfast when you knocked on the door."

He stepped over to the mantel, gave the fire some attention to start it to burning briskly again, and was about to take hold of the stocking that had been hung up for him when he stopped short.

Something was peeping above the one his mother had hung up for herself, and into which Dick had managed to cram the present he had purchased for her. It looked like a formidable document to Dick too, and somehow the sight of

it gave him a cold shiver, as though he feared new developments that might mean more trouble.

"I wonder what it is," he muttered, uneasily; and then overcome by curiosity, he reached forth his hand, and boldly drew the document out.

Leslie too leaned forward as Dick gazed at the paper which he now knew Uncle Silas must have placed there after all the rest had retired.

"Oh, my stars!" ejaculated Leslie, shrilly. "It's a real Government bond, don't you see, Dick, with your mother's full name on it, and for—why, I must be dreaming—*ten thousand dollars!*"

Dick uttered a loud cry that seemed to come from the depths of his overcharged heart. As if the shout had been a signal to draw them, the little mother came hurrying in from the kitchen, while grandpop made his appearance, cane in hand, his room being close at hand.

"What's the matter, Dick?" questioned Mrs. Horner, looking deeply interested.

"Leslie fetched you a present, did he?" demanded the veteran as his eyes fell upon the glistening hockey skates lying neglected now on the table.

Dick could not say a word, but he thrust the wonderful paper into the hands of his mother. Her eyes drank in the printed form on the outside, with her name plainly inscribed as the owner of the bond.

"What does it mean, Son?" she asked, weakly. "I don't seem able to understand."

"Why, it's a Christmas present for you, Mrs. Horner, from Uncle Silas," explained Leslie, only too desirous of making immediate amends for all his base suspicions of the past. "He's waited his time, and sprung the greatest surprise I ever heard of on you all. Bully for Uncle Silas, I say; *he's* all right!"

"What's this you're saying about me?" asked a voice, and the wanderer appeared in view, his weather-beaten face wreathed in a broad smile of happiness and contentment. "They say listeners never hear any good of themselves. Tell me to my face if you dare."

Polly looked at him almost helplessly. Then she raised the precious Government bond, with the magic figures printed upon it.

"What—where—how—oh! Silas, how could you deceive us so, and let us believe you poor and homeless, when you were a rich man all the while?"

Thereupon Uncle Silas gathered the little woman into his arms, and, kissing her fondly, went on to solve the mystery.

"Well," he proceeded to explain, seeing that they were all consumed with natural curiosity, "after losing three fortunes through being too greedy, I finally got hold of a claim that I sold for

fifty thousand dollars cash. By that time I was in fact broken in health, so I firmly determined to hunt up any relatives I might have left, and if they proved to be the right sort, stay with them the balance of my life, leaving them all I had in return."

"And you were playing a sly game on us all the while, you rogue!" remarked the old veteran, as he grasped the wanderer's extended hand, and squeezed it heartily.

"Can you blame me in one way?" demanded Uncle Silas. "I wanted to be very sure that I was being received for myself alone, and not because I was worth that much money. Of course, I soon learned that there were hearts of true gold under this humble roof, and that I would never be allowed to leave it. But it pleased me to persist in my assumed role until this happy morning came."

"And true enough, as you said, 'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning!'" cried Mrs. Horner, with her sisterly arms about his neck. "Surely the clouds did not last long, and the dawn seems all the more beautiful because of that letter yesterday."

"It's the greatest Christmas that ever was!" cried Dick, as he too hung on to the hand of Uncle Silas. "How glad I am to know that after all I needn't give up my schooling yet."

"You are a fine lad, and I'm proud to have you

for my nephew," said Uncle Silas, heartily. "Please Heaven you shall go to college, and find your true place in a world that needs just such fellows as you. There will be no reason for any of the dear ones under this roof to face want again, for I have enough for all, and what is mine is yours. You offered me a home when you believed me poor and sick. I have proved your hearts by deeds; after this we will find true happiness together here."

Dick could hardly eat a morsel of breakfast, he was so excited. Several times he even asked Leslie, who stayed to the meal with them, to pinch him, for he felt he really must be dreaming, and that on being aroused the amazing event would prove to be only an illusion.

But the sight of that wonderful Government bond on the mantel always gave him renewed hope and strengthened his wavering faith.

"After all, I guess this has been a glorious day for you, old fellow," Leslie was saying, as he donned his outer coat, and prepared to run over home so as to carry the delightful news.

"I never saw the sky look so blue before in all my life," the other boy admitted. "And listen to the church bells ringing, will you? It seems to me they must know all that's happened here, and are singing just as my heart's doing right now. I'm the happiest fellow in Cliffwood; and I ought

to get out so as to try to make some other chap feel a little the same way by doing him a good turn."

"My mother will be just tickled half to death," asserted Leslie. "She's been doing little save talk about your trouble ever since I told her, trying to figure out how she could help you all without offending you. I just can't stay any longer because I want to tell her the big news. Hurrah for Uncle Silas, say I! He's turned out to be a regular trump! And how he did fool me in the bargain!"

With that Leslie hurried away, only turning to wave his hand at his chum, and shout out:

"Everything's headed your way at last, Dick; and I bet you five cents against a cookey that fine farce of yours is bound to take the prize Mr. Holwell's offering. Nat may try all he wants, but he can't fight against such luck as has set in toward the Horners. Mark my words, will you?"

Dick only laughed in reply as he closed the door, and once more went in to make sure the amazing paper still stood there on the mantel in the living room. If he took it in his hands and examined the precious document once that morning, he did a dozen times; though finally Mrs. Horner thought it best to place it securely away in a receptacle where she kept the few little valuables she possessed.

Toward the middle of the morning, Dick, re-

membering his new hockey skates, managed to tear himself away from the little house where so much happiness was concentrated, and go forth to seek the big pond, with the intention of testing the steel runners.

And during that day the boy sought and found some fellow who had been utterly forgotten by the patron saint of Christmas, upon whom he bestowed his other skates, as well as something in the shape of money. Dick's heart was overflowing with gratitude for the amazing good fortune that had come to his home; and this, according to his mind, was the only way in which he could pass the good cheer along.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE END OF THE STRUGGLE

THE time had finally come when the committee appointed to judge the several farces entered in the competition for the prize, met to complete their part of the proceedings.

Every fellow who belonged to the Boys' Department of the prosperous Y. M. C. A., as well as many of the girls, were on the tiptoe of excitement. While the vast majority of them firmly believed that Dick was sure to be the successful candidate for honors, there were others who seemed confident that Nat would come in a winner.

"I understand," said Elmer Jones, as the boys began to gather that evening in the hall, where the choice was to be duly announced, "that the committee is now in session in another part of the building, and having the best of the farces read aloud by Mr. Parkhurst, who once upon a time used to be a public reader."

"Sure thing," added Peg Fosdick. "And I'll tell you a little secret in the bargain. Never mind

how I came to know it, but you can depend on it for a fact."

"Pitch right in then, Peg!" urged one of those clustered around the two.

"It takes Peg to get on the track of things," laughed another.

"Listen then," Peg went on softly, in his mysterious way. "While Mr. Holwell, you understand, isn't on the committee, he has been asked to join them. I saw him going through just a little while back."

"Whew! I wonder what that can mean?" remarked Phil Harkness.

"Mebbe there's some sort of hitch, and they need an umpire to decide it," suggested Clint Babbett.

"Either that," went on Peg, with a wink, first at Dick, and then toward Nat, both of whom were in the bunch, "or else it's a neck and neck race between a couple of well known junior residents of Cliffwood, and they're looking for some reason to penalize one of the contestants."

"You're all wrong," spoke up Andy Hale. "Listen to me. Remember that little anecdote about the sailor and the soldier. Some one wanted to know which could give the time of day best. One fellow said the soldier ought to, because he so often had to mark time. But the answer was that the sailor must be best qualified to tell, for the sim-

ple reason that he had *been to sea*. Well, I'm the Jack Tar, and I've been on the job."

"Then why was Mr. Holwell called into the room with the committee?" demanded Nat, boldly; and those who were close to him could see that he looked plainly concerned, as though the suspense might be wearing heavily on him; while, on the other hand, Dick seemed utterly unconcerned, for the money part of the prize no longer appealed to him as before his recent good fortune.

"Why, it seems that the committee have decided on what they believe to be the greatest farce of the lot, as well as the one that's second best. To make sure of their ground, they thought it only right Mr. Howell should hear the prize effort. Seems that it must be a stunner, that's nearly taken their breath away."

At that Nat chuckled, and threw out his chest.

"You wouldn't believe me, you fellows," he remarked, loftily; "but just wait and see. I reckon you'll change your minds some before long."

"Yep," added Dit Hennesy, boastfully, "nobody suspected that there was a budding genius alivin' here right in old Cliffwood. You'll all admit, after you hear his dandy farce read, that Nat's got the goods. All the rest'll have to take his dust when he travels along the road."

"Look! there's Mr. Holwell going out again!" exclaimed Elmer.

"And he's mighty serious looking too, make a note of it!" added Peg.

"I wonder what's up?" remarked Andy. "They must have bumped up against a snag of some kind."

Leslie chanced to be looking toward Nat just when Andy said this, and he saw the other give a big start. His face went several degrees whiter too, which was rather a singular thing in the case of an expectant winner.

"Gee! I wonder now, is Nat up to any of his old tricks?" was the thought that flashed through the brain of Leslie as he noticed this.

Nat must have taken a firm grip of himself, for the pallor quickly gave way to his customary ruddy hue. He watched the door until the minister again came into the building. Mr. Holwell was carrying something in his hand which he had evidently gone to his home to get.

"Looks like it might be a roll of manuscript, too," suggested Peg, humorously. "Wouldn't it be queer if Mr. Holwell had entered as a contestant for his own prize?"

"You're away off in your guess," ventured Clint Babbett; "for when he passed us I could plainly see that it was a printed paper booklet, and one that looked as if it might be an old relic of his minstrel days!"

Nat shrank back, and said nothing; but when

Leslie glanced curiously that way, he discovered that once more the color had fled from the cheeks of the boaster.

"Ginger!" muttered Leslie to himself, "I wonder what ails Nat anyway? He's acting just as if he was in mortal fear of something jumping at him."

Minutes passed, and more people continued to arrive, the big room beginning to fill up, for a great deal of interest was being taken in the awarding of the prize. So much had been said from time to time about the keen competition, that the excitement among the boys and girls was at white heat.

Even Mr. Loft, the librarian, whose superior airs had so offended the boys of the town, had condescended to grace the affair with his presence, though never before had he been known to attend a meeting like this.

"I'm beginning to have some hopes that in time Mr. Loft will grow to be really human," Leslie was saying to his mates, when he spied the cultured librarian in a seat not far away. "He's finding out that to know and understand boys he's just got to mingle with them."

"Mr. Holwell does that," observed another boy, and that is why all of us are ready to do anything he asks us. We know that he's always thinking of helping a fellow who's backward, or in trouble."

"Here comes Harry Bartlett straight this way!" exclaimed Peg.

"Isn't he one of the three committeemen who were appointed to judge the farces?" demanded a boy.

"Of course he is," replied Peg. "And since they've run up against a snag p'raps he's after Dick here to ask a question or so."

Dick laughed in a free and easy manner. Indeed, he would have been only too willing to answer a score of questions just then, for his mind was perfectly free from all sources of anxiety.

"You are wanted in the committee room, Nat!" said Harry Bartlett, shortly.

"Who—me? What for?" asked Nat, in a trembling voice.

"Never mind until you get there," replied the other sharply. "I was asked to bring you back with me; that's all I can say," with which words the leader of the Y. M. C. A. turned and retraced his steps.

Nat tried to grin, for he knew that every eye just then was fastened on him. But the attempt was not much of a success. He arose to his feet and shuffled after the messenger of the committee. The rest of the boys gaped as they saw the door of the committee room close on him.

"Whew! I wonder what's doing?" ventured Clint.

"Ten to one Nat's been up to some crooked work again," said Peg.

"You'd like to believe so, wouldn't you?" sneered Dit Hennesy, who, however, had a half alarmed look on his sallow face. "Chances are the committee want to congratulate Nat privately on his genius before they make the public announcement."

"Sure!" jeered Peg. "And Nat must have believed that too, even if he did look like a criminal being led to the execution block when he left us just now. Watch and see what happens."

Ten minutes passed away. Then the door opened again, and Nat came out. He was holding his head up, and grinning, but they could see what an effort it cost him to put on such a bold, reckless face.

To the astonishment of the boys, and the dismay of Dit, Nat, instead of rejoining them, waved his hand derisively, and quitted the building.

"Say, something must have busted in there!" exclaimed Peg, excitedly.

"Huh! looks like the jig was up," grunted Dit; and presently he, too, was among the missing.

"There come the committee and they're headed for the stage!" said Clint. "Now the suspense will soon be over, for Harry Bartlett is going to announce the finding of the judges."

The crowded room became as still as death

when the leader of the Y. M. C. A. commenced to speak in his ready fashion.

"My friends, I am about to announce the verdict of the committee appointed to serve as judges in this contest arranged by Mr. Holwell. We did our duty faithfully, and every farce submitted was read carefully by all of us. Then on taking a vote it was found that all must be eliminated save two, both of which evinced positive merit.

"A second vote disclosed the fact that the majority of the committee believed one of these to have more merit than the other, though the names of the contestants were unknown to us at the time. In order that we should do no boy an injustice it was decided to invite Mr. Holwell, whose ability in that line you all know, to come in to hear these two farces read by Mr. Parkhurst.

"When Mr. Holwell heard the leading farce read, he looked serious, and asked that the one that stood second choice should also be given. Then he requested us to wait while he went home and rooted through an old trunk where he kept some mementoes of the old days when he once took part in a minstrel show, before he thought of studying for the ministry.

"When he came back he brought with him a printed farce, published many years ago, and in which he remembered once acting. No sooner had he commenced reading this than we realized

that the one we had selected as the winner had been copied almost word for word from the printed playlet.

"The pretended author was called in, and when accused, readily admitted practicing the deceit, though he stoutly claimed it was only done for a joke, and that he would not have accepted the money prize. He has been reprimanded, and has departed with his stolen effort. I need hardly tell you his name, for most of you can already guess it.

"Of course, after that there was no difficulty in deciding on the farce that was plainly entitled to the prize; and I have great pleasure in announcing to you that the twenty-five dollars in gold, together with the congratulations of the judges, go to Richard Horner for his original black-face farce entitled *When Erastus Came Home*, which I trust all of you will have the pleasure of hearing in the town hall two weeks from tonight. I thank you."

His last words were drowned in a roar of cheers that went up from the boys. Those who could reach Dick shook his hands unmercifully; others slapped him on the back, as they showered congratulations on him.

CHAPTER XXX

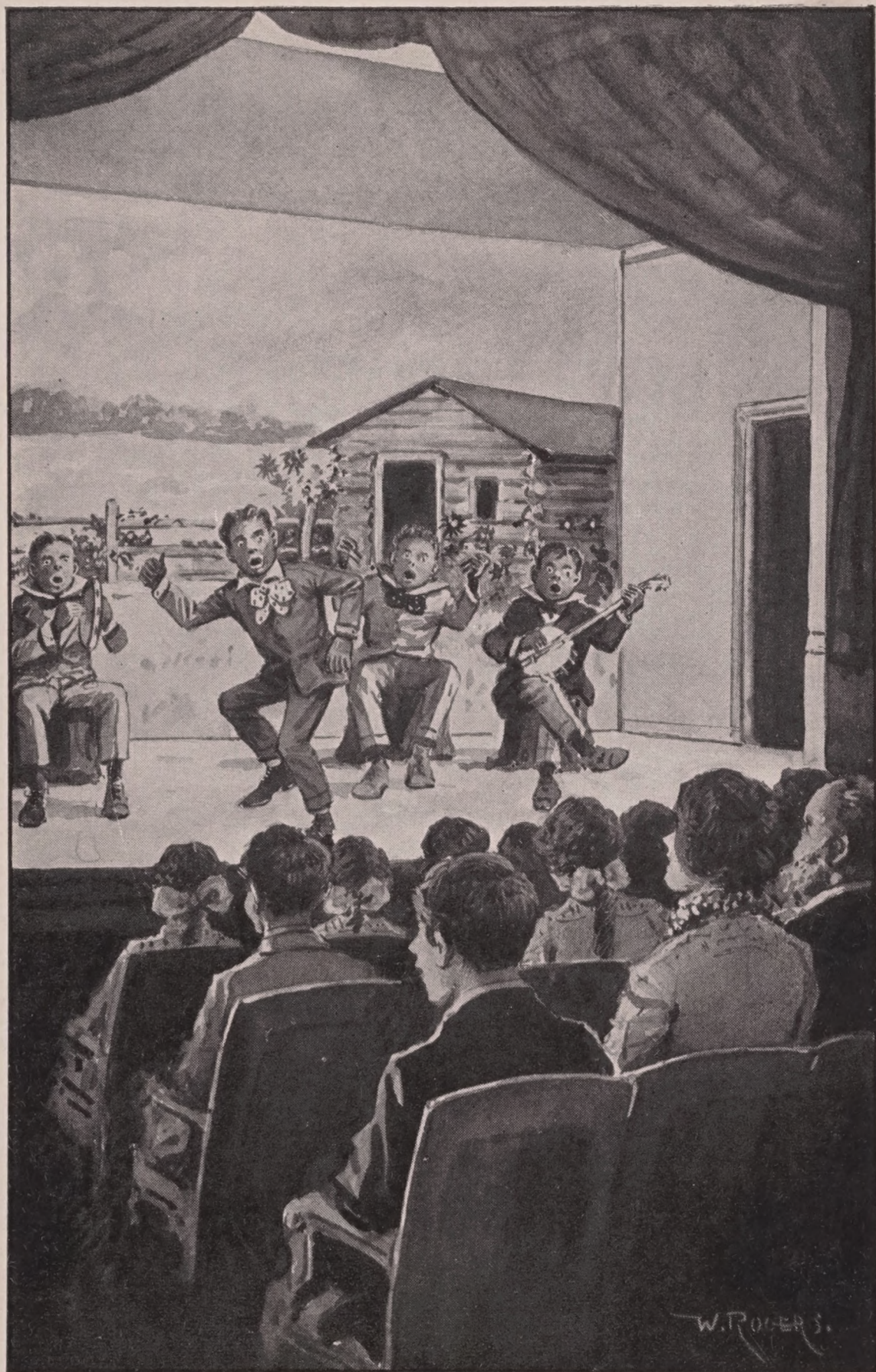
CONCLUSION

WHEN the two weeks had elapsed, the town hall was crowded to its utmost capacity with one of the finest audiences that had ever been seen in Cliffwood. Of course, Uncle Silas, Grandpop Horner, Dick's mother and little sister Susie were present to see how the boys who participated in the minstrels carried out their various parts, and Mr. Nocker also came, accompanied by his daughter-in-law.

The Y. M. C. A. boys had rehearsed faithfully, under the supervision of Mr. Holwell, who must have had a revival of his old-time interest when he coached the amateur performers.

Dick was one of the end men, and Peg played the part of his rival at the other extremity of the line. If the jokes which ran through the first part of the entertainment caused considerable hilarity in the audience some of the credit was due to the ability shown by these two performers.

Then followed other features of the show, and in one of these Dick was enabled to display his



W. ROGERS.

THE MUCH-TALKED-OF FARCE WOUND UP THE EVENING'S
ENTERTAINMENT.

The Y. M. C. A. Boys of Cliffwood

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really wonderful powers as an amateur ventriloquist, playing the banjo during the same turn quite cleverly.

The much-talked-of farce wound up the evening's entertainment, and every one agreed that it was about as humorous a sketch as they had ever heard or read. Even Nat was to be seen in the audience, his customary grin adorning his bold face; and it was quite evident that he had come out to hear what sort of thing Dick had originated to compete against his own stolen effort.

In the commencement of the evening Harry Bartlett had made an announcement to the effect that the entertainment was to be repeated for two successive nights.

"The receipts are to be devoted to several purposes connected with this new branch of the Y. M. C. A.," he went on to state; "one of which I am pleased to say will be the extending of the Boys' Library, which already contains over one hundred volumes of books written by such authors as the boys love. All of these books have been approved by a capable censor, Mr. Holwell, who knows what a boy should read better than any other person in Cliffwood."

As Harry made this broad statement there was a sudden whirlwind of applause for a full minute that must have cheered the heart of the minister; nor would the boys stop clapping their hands until

from his corner, where he had hoped to remain unobserved, Mr. Holwell was forced to stand up, and, waving his hand, smilingly say:

"Thank you all, a thousand times. I would rather be reckoned a true friend of the boys of Cliffwood than to conquer a kingdom. And to the older persons present, some of whom may have entertained doubts about the success of our latest movement to interest our lads in clean sports and indoor entertainments, I wish to say, watch the streets these nights, and compare things with what they were six months ago. That is all."

When the farce had finally come to an end amidst uproarious laughter, there was no disposition on the part of the audience to disperse immediately.

"They want you, Dick!" said Leslie, behind the curtain.

"Listen to 'em calling your name!" added Peg, delightedly. "The fellows are shouting it in concert, just as they do the school yell at the football games."

"You've got to step out before the curtain and say a few words, or they'll pull the house down," Elmer told the laughing and excited author of the piece.

"I'd rather take a licking, but I suppose I'll just have to do it," Dick went on to say, with a shrug of his shoulders.

When, black face and all, Dick made his appearance before the curtain, there was a tumultuous shout, after which all became quiet, as they listened for what he would say. Fortunately, Dick was not so bashful that he lost command of his tongue. Besides, he could see that little mother sitting there so proudly watching him; yes, and closer up there was Connie Swazy too, with her eyes sparkling and her little hands clapping vigorously.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Dick, bravely, "it is very kind of you to give a poor struggling author so much encouragement in his first effort. I did the best I could, and I hope you got your money's worth from the entertainment as a whole. We mean to try to do a heap better tomorrow night, so ask your friends to attend, if one dose is all you can stand."

"Hear! hear!" cried a crowd of the boys seated close to the stage.

"And there's just one thing more," continued Dick, casting a roguish look in the direction of Connie, who instantly shook her finger, at the same time turning rosy red. "I noticed that you seemed to enjoy the original airs to which my poor songs were sung. They were composed by Miss Connie Swazy, and I believe will be whistled by every boy in Cliffwood for a long time to come. That's all I've got to say. Thank you."

Everybody voted the affair a huge success. If the other two nights did as well there would be a substantial sum put in the bank for the Junior Department of the local Y. M. C. A., which would purchase much needed equipment in the gymnasium, as well as many new books quoted on the fall lists of city publishers.

As was to be expected there was an influx of new members at once, and Mr. Holwell realized that he had made no mistake in getting up the entertainment with the object of arousing fresh interest in the work he was doing.

"And the best part of it all is," remarked Dick, as he and several others talked over matters one afternoon when on the way home from school, "we're going to have a glorious time week after week from now on, what with the lectures, the gymnasium nights, the regular meetings, and all the fun that's in store for us."

"Yes," added Leslie, "Mr. Holwell never knows when to stop once he gets started doing things for boys. My Uncle Henry is interesting old Mr. Nocker in some new scheme right now. They won't give me a hint of what it is; but I've got a suspicion it has to do with a grand big outing for next summer. Why, the old deacon is a different man nowadays from what he used to be! That coming of little Billy put new life in him, let me tell you!"

"No matter what they're planning ahead for us," said Dick, "one thing we know, and that is the biggest event that ever happened for the boys of Cliffwood came out of that fierce Hallowe'en joke of Nat Silmore's. Mr. Holwell says it was the stepping stone that led to his thinking up the Junior League of the Y. M. C. A."

"I only wish every town had a man like Mr. Holwell in it, who knew boys from the ground up," ventured Peg Fosdick, vehemently. "And all the same I'd give something to learn what sort of good time they're fixing up for us."

Perhaps Peg would have had his curiosity satisfied had he been able to read the title of the next story in this series, which will be, "The Y. M. C. A. Boys on Bass Island; or The Mystery of Russabaga Camp." In that volume we shall see how Jed Nocker came to the front in a most unexpected manner; and what his offer to the Y. M. C. A. boys led to.

Dick was very happy when he looked at the five shining five-dollar gold pieces which the committee had handed over to him.

"Now I've got my own new suit of clothes," he said to Leslie, "I am going to buy something for mother and little Susie. And five dollars is going to the good of every boy in the Y. M. C. A."

"What do you mean by that, Dick?" his chum asked him.

"I am going to buy books with it for our Library—cracking good stories that all the boys will like."

"Hurrah! Dick, that will be fine!"

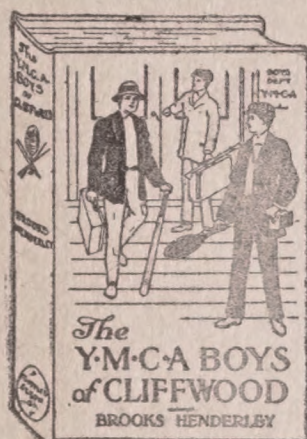
And here, for the time being, let us bid farewell to the Y. M. C. A. Boys of Cliffwood.

THE END

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Summer was at hand, and at a meeting of the boys of the Y. M. C. A. of Cliffwood, it was decided that a regular summer camp should be instituted. This was located at a beautiful spot on Bass Island, and there the lads went boating, swimming, fishing and tramping to their heart's content. There were a great many surprises, but in the end the boys managed to clear up a mystery of long standing. Incidentally, the volume gives a clear insight into the workings of the now justly popular summer camps of the Y. M. C. A., throughout the United States.

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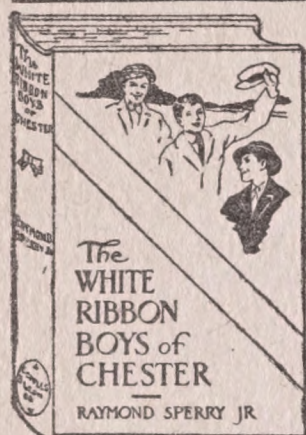
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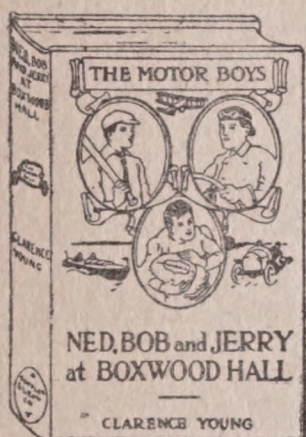
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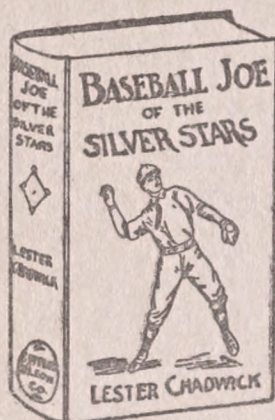
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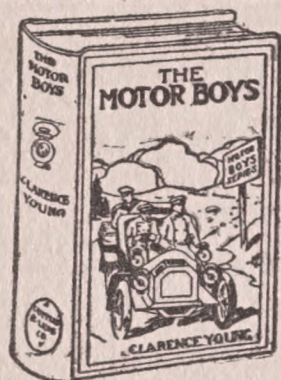
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